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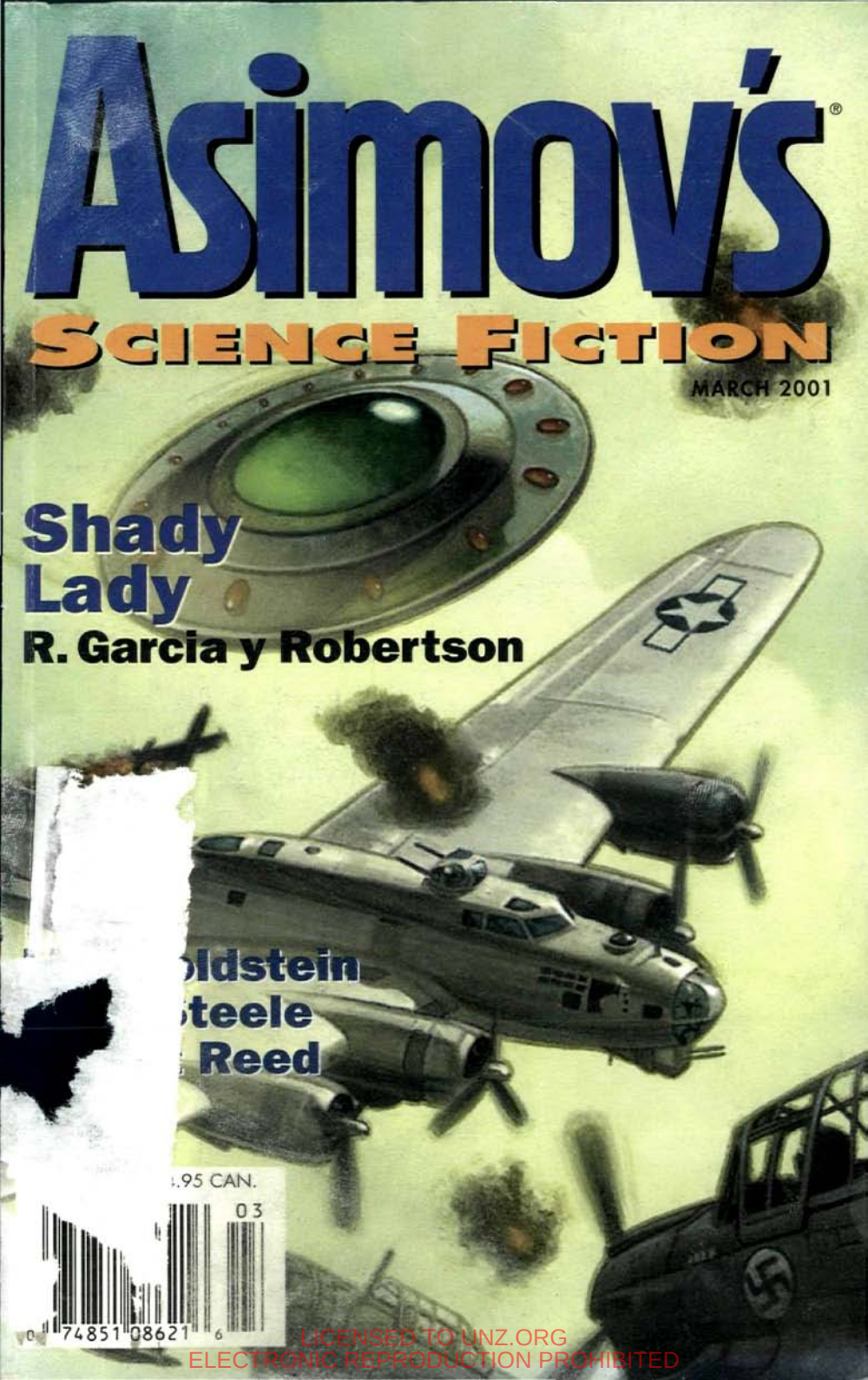

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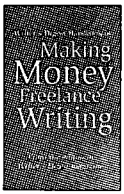

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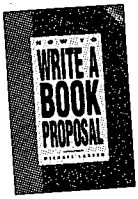

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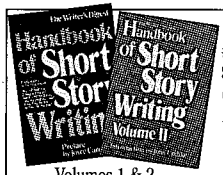

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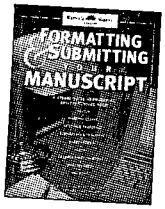

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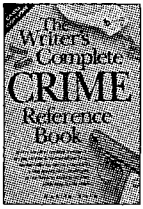

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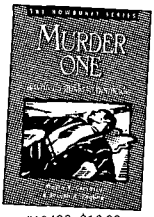

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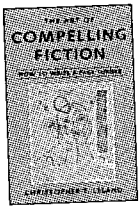

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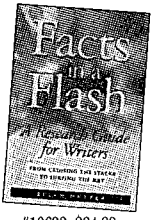

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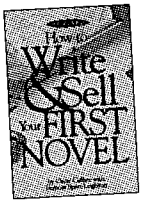

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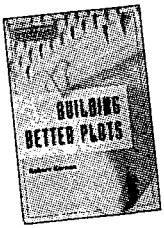

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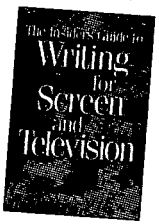

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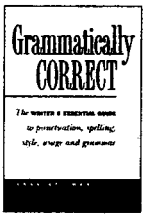

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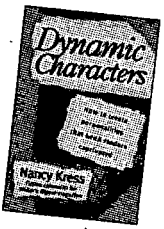

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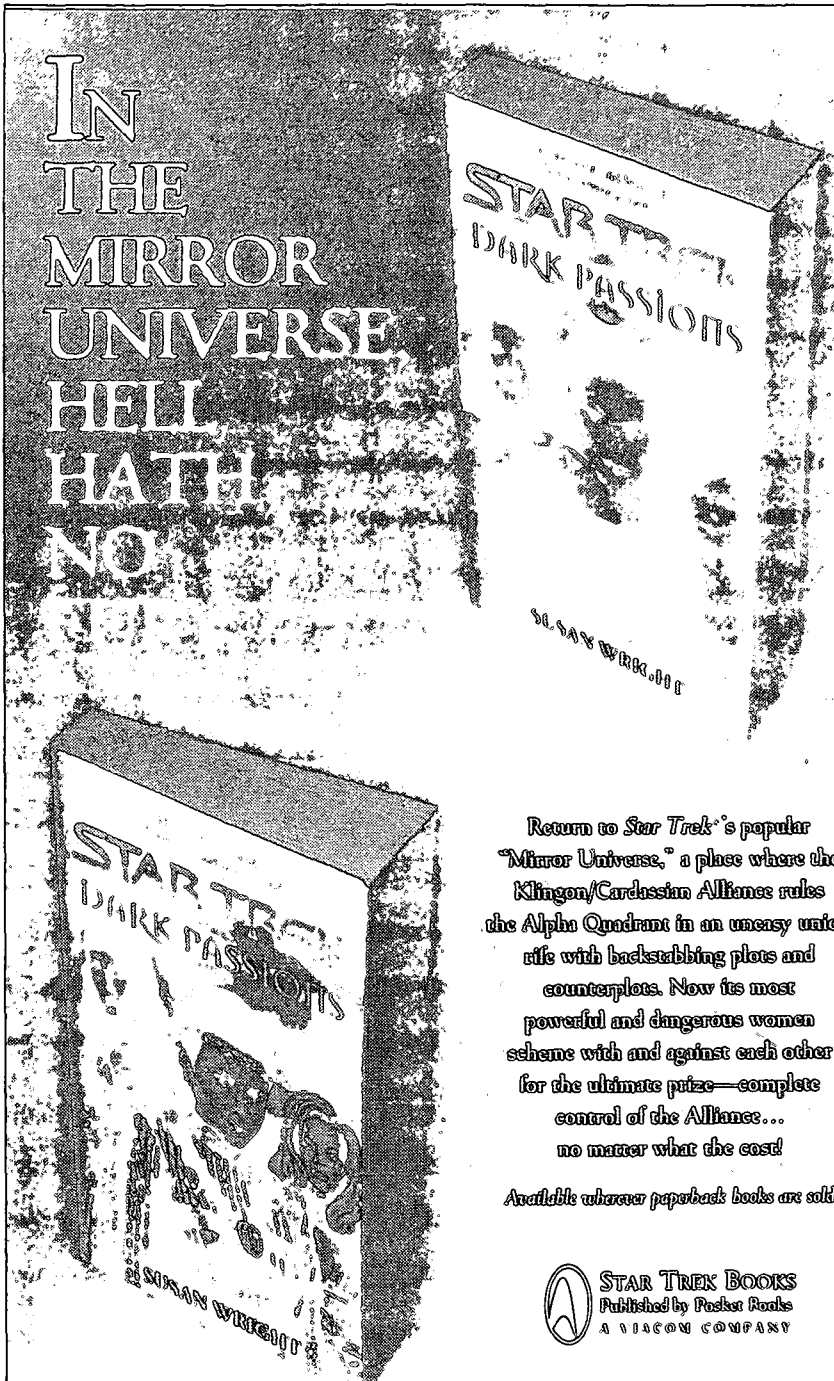

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

THE NEW WAVE

It occurred to me the other day that the revolutionary New Wave era—the most dramatic period of literary experimentation in the history of science fiction—now lies three and a half decades in the past, and most of today's SF readers have no awareness that any such upheaval ever took place, let alone why it happened and what its consequences were. But most of the science fiction stories you read today in *Asimov's Science Fiction* (and also *Fantasy and Science Fiction,* and the recently deceased *Science Fiction Age*) have their roots in the New Wave period. For all its moments of pretentiousness, obscurantism, and downright foolishness, and the ultimate disappearance from view of even its finest work, the New Wave of 1965-72 transformed the science fiction landscape.

I was there. I watched it happen. I was part of it, sometimes without knowing that I was. And I have survived to tell the tale.

The standard view of the New Wave story nowadays, among those who know anything about it at all, goes something like this: until 1965, science fiction was an artistic and intellectual desert, dominated by a few tyrannical editors who served the needs of an undemanding, uncritical public by forcing all writers to crank out simple, formulaic stories, devoid of all stylistic flair and intellectual individuality. Only standard themes (space war, time travel, robots) were permitted, and all stories had to have positive, uplifting endings. Then, suddenly, a turbulent bunch of brilliant young nonconformist writers arrived on the scene, bringing with them a host of new ideas and new ways of telling stories, and drove all the reactionary editors and their cadres of musty old hacks from the scene.

Some of that is true. Most of it isn't.

For one thing, the science fiction world prior to the advent of the New Wave was not quite the literary wasteland some people later tried to pretend it was. The classic books and stories of Heinlein, Asimov, Bradbury, Sturgeon, Simak, van Vogt, Williamson, Vance, Bester, Kuttner, Leiber, and many others—the foundation-blocks of the field—date from that period.

Even the much-maligned early 1960s, supposedly a time of terrible sterility, were, after all, an era that gave us Frank Herbert's *Dune,* Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle,* Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land,* and the first important books and stories of Roger Zelazny, Larry Niven, Brian Aldiss, R.A. Lafferty, J.G. Ballard, and Samuel R. Delany. Still, it seemed to most of us at that time that science fiction was marching in place—was stagnant, even. For each *Stranger* or *High Castle* we got dozens of predictable, familiar rehashes of the standard themes. Very few writers were inclined—especially considering the low rates of pay in our small, sleepy field—to take risks in their fiction.

Nor were there any editors around to spur us on to more exciting work. John W. Campbell, the first of the three great magazine editors who had guided science fiction through a

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golden age of creative inventiveness that had lasted from 1939 through 1955, had turned away from innovation for the sake of pursuing a didactic exploration of a few quirky personal theories, and the other two, Horace Gold and Anthony Boucher, had withdrawn from the scene altogether. Many magazines of the earlier era had gone out of business. Those that survived, and the book publishers of the time, seemed to espouse a play-it-safe mentality. Even though plenty of good work still was being done, many writers—I was one of them—were losing interest in science fiction and turning to other fields.

New writers, though, were still coming in, as they always will, even in the dreariest of times—Zelazny, Delany, Tom Disch, Joanna Russ, Norman Spinrad, Ursula K. Le Guin, and others in the United States, and Ballard, Aldiss, Michael Moorcock, M. John Harrison, Christopher Priest, David Masson, and many more in Great Britain. And suddenly a revolution was going on in science fiction.

Two revolutions, in fact: a formally defined, overtly declared war of new vs. old in Great Britain, and a free-form sort of randomly waged insurrection over here.

The onset of the British battle can be explicitly dated to the spring of 1964, when editorial control of *New Worlds*—the only important British science fiction magazine—passed from E.J. Carnell to Michael Moorcock. Carnell, a central figure in British SF since the 1930s, had edited a good, sober, middle-of-the-road science fiction magazine built around the old-fashioned storytelling values—a British counterpart to John Campbell's *Astounding*, leaning heavily on such writers as James White, E.C. Tubb, John Christopher, J.T. McIntosh, John Brunner, and John Wyndham to cre-

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ate a distinctively British variation on standard American SF. But Carnell, though his tastes were conservative, was no reactionary, and the magazine also published the early stories of Brian Aldiss and J.G. Ballard, heralds of the explosions to come.

Then the magazine changed hands, Carnell retired, and twenty-four-year-old Michael Moorcock took charge. Moorcock had been a prolific contributor to Carnell's magazine, but he also had a background in comic books and other pop-culture media, and had close connections in the new and swiftly burgeoning rock-music field (1964 was, please remember, the year that the Beatles surged to worldwide prominence). *New Worlds* for May-June 1964 was his first issue, and he opened it with an editorial headed "A New Literature for the Space Age" that we can now see, in retrospect, as the manifesto of the new revolution:

"In a recent BBC broadcast, William Burroughs, controversial American author of *Dead Fingers Talk*, said something like this: 'If writers are to describe the advanced techniques of the Space Age, they must invent writing techniques equally as advanced in order properly to deal with them.'

"Burroughs' own writing techniques are as exciting—and as relevant to our own present situation—as the latest discovery in nuclear physics. . . ."

After going on to describe Burroughs' work as "the SF we have all been waiting for," and to declare it, despite or perhaps because of its descriptions of sexual aberration and drug addiction, its frequent use of obscenities, its supposed obscurity of meaning, as "stimulating and thought-provoking," Moorcock declared that "the desperate and cynical mood of his work mirrors exactly the mood of our ad-saturated, Bomb-dominated, power-corrupted times."

Whatever else science fiction had been up until that moment, it had rarely if ever been "desperate and cynical" in mood. But the times were a-changing. Moorcock called for science fiction writers to join Burroughs in creating "a new mythology—a new literature for the Space Age." There were, he said, certain British writers already going in that direction, "producing a kind of SF which is unconventional in every sense and which must soon be recognized as an important revitalization of the literary mainstream. More and more people are turning away from the fast-stagnating pool of the conventional novel—and they are turning to science fiction (or speculative fantasy). This is a sign, among others, that a *popular* literary renaissance is around the corner."

In the first issue of his version of *New Worlds,* Moorcock led off with "Equinox," the first part of a novel by J.G. Ballard later published in book form as *The Crystal World.* Ballard's work had overtones of Joseph Conrad and Graham Greene, not of Robert Heinlein or A.E. van Vogt. Still, publishing it was not an enormous departure from the Carnell magazine, which had serialized several of Ballard's previous novels. The fine stories by Aldiss and Brunner that followed it in that issue might also have fit equally as well into the old *New Worlds* as into the new. But Barrington Bayley, the author of the fourth story, was a member of the Moorcock circle, and his story had a distinctly New Wave tone, though nobody reading it then would have used that term.

In the months that followed, Moorcock uncorked upon a startled British readership a host of new writers—Charles Platt, Langdon Jones, Pamela Zoline, Josephine

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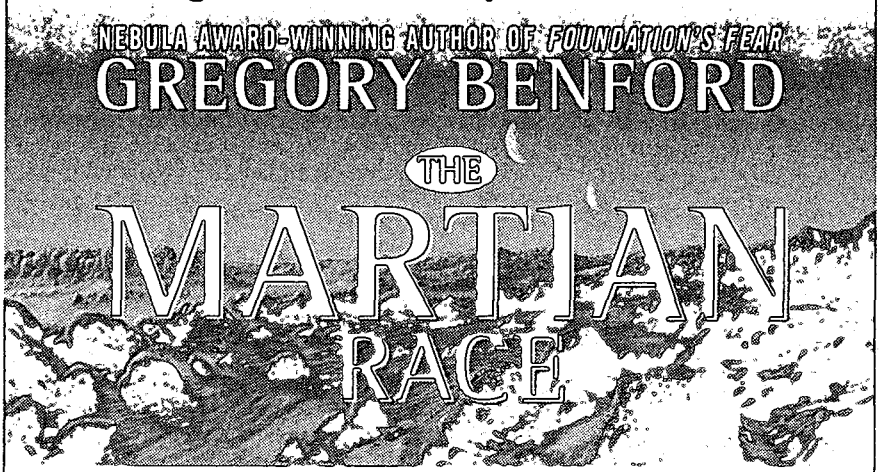

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Saxton, John Sladek, Hilary Bailey, and James Colvin (who turned out to be Moorcock himself). Their work, ever more fiercely experimental as time went on, veered farther and farther away from the robots and time machines and galactic empires of traditional SF into the realm of what Ballard called "inner space," an exploration of the complexities of angst-ridden twentieth-century life. Some of it was barely recognizable, if recognizable at all, as science fiction. Much of it employed so fragmentary a narrative mode that it was well-nigh incomprehensible.

But the Moorcock magazine was very much of its time, the time of Swinging England—rock, drugs, miniskirts, Day-Glo colors—and *New Worlds* was deeply caught up in all the new modes of living and writing, so much so that within a few years its distributor refused to sell the magazine on grounds of "obscenity and libel," and one of its contributors (Norman Spinrad) was denounced in Parliament as a "nameless degenerate."

The Moorcock-led revolution in England had not gone unnoticed on the other side of the Atlantic, thanks primarily to the brilliant, restless, and often aggressively opinionated writer and critic, Judith Merril, who in 1965 had begun writing a monthly book column for *Fantasy and Science Fiction.*

It was in her November, 1967 column that she first told her readers of what was going on in British SF. She termed it The New Thing, perhaps because she liked the explosive acronym, TNT, and she described its method as "the application of contemporary and sometimes (though mostly not very) experimental literary techniques to the kind of contemporary/experimental speculation which is the essence of science fiction." But its content was as important as its style: fiction that took into account such things as "op art, student protest, the new sexual revolution, psychedelics, and a multiplex of other manifestations of the silly-sounding phrase, Flower Power. . . ."

By then all those things had burst upon the startled citizenry of the United States, too, and American science fiction was changing almost as fast as the British kind. More about the New Wave next month. O

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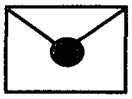

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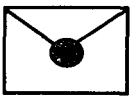

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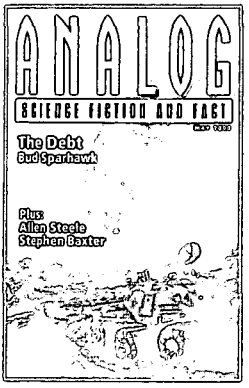

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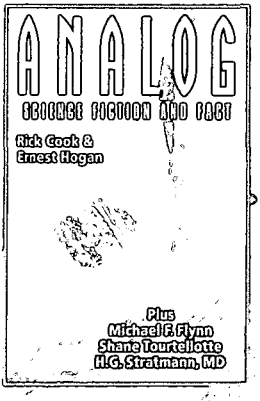

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On the Net

James Patrick Kelly

EBOOKS

E-gads!

Okay, it's time to get serious about online science fiction. New and reprint sites are popping up like mushrooms after a monsoon. Hardware and software companies are offering new, or at least *improved,* technologies to ease the strain of eyeballing print on screens. And of course, with his phenomenally successful *Riding the Bullet,* Stephen King single-handedly seems to have legitimized the entire e-publishing industry—and not just our own little corner of it. Or has he? King's second foray into ebooks, a serial called *The Plant,* is under a cloud as I type on this bright September afternoon. Should he shut it down, as he is currently threatening to do, he may well slow public acceptance of ebooks.

But nothing will stop it.

You see, more important than the King phenomenon is the Evil Empire's release of **Microsoft Reader** <*http://www.microsoft.com/reader/*>, yours free for the downloading. Its Clear Type technology is supposed to "deliver the look and feel of high-resolution printing to on-screen reading." Well, maybe. Even the large typeface looks pretty small to these middle-aged eyes on a fifteen inch monitor. Heaven forbid that I'll ever have to plough though a book of *Dune*-ish proportions on a laptop, Clear Type or no. But Microsoft Reader is a signal from Our Kindly Uncle Bill to print publishers and cyber-entrepreneurs alike: this market is now open for serious business.

If the truth be told, I'd rather access content with the **Glassbook Reader** <*http://www.glassbook.com*> which can also read Adobe Acrobat PDF files, mostly because it is much more flexible than Microsoft Reader with regards to sizing typeface. For those visionaries reading stories on a **Palm** <*http://www.palm.com/*> or Handspring's **Visor** <*http://www.handspring.com/*>, or one of the Windows CE handhelds, there is the **Peanut Reader** <*http://www.peanutpress.com*>. Yet another hardware/software platform for ebooks is the relaunch of the **Rocket eBook** and the **Softbook Reader** <*http://www.ebook-gemstar.com/*>. These, you may recall, are the much-ballyhooed devices that were supposed to replace paper books. They did not exactly take the marketplace by storm, in part because they cost too damn much. The two companies that produced them were subsequently gobbled up by Gemstar, which has the deep pockets to give them a second chance. The revamped hardware will be built by RCA. I've played some with the Rocket eBook and I have to say that it has serious tech-nogeek appeal, but I'm still worried that it doesn't hit the price point most cheapskates—me, for instance—are willing to pay.

But what is an ebook, anyway? According to **eBookAd.com** <*http://www.ebookad.com/*>, "The term ebook refers to an electronic book. A

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good ebook consists of much more than the textual contents of a book. It preserves the style, page layout, fonts and graphics of a publication." It's worth noting that the term ebook does not necessarily imply that the work is of "book length." A short story can be an ebook. Now, not all science fiction online is in an ebook format. Several of the most important new SF sites present their wares in good old HTML. The problem with HTML is that it is plug ugly. There are no indents at the start of a paragraph and all paragraphs have a space in between them. I suppose I might get used to these quirks eventually—perhaps the day after the heat death of the universe. There has been talk for some time of a revision to HTML that will offer the look and feel of print. It can't come soon enough for me, since I find reading stories in a browser window to be ever so slightly distracting, sort of like walking around with a shoe untied.

Another important difference between ebooks and website-based fiction is that, for the most part, the good ebooks are going to cost you, while much of the best website-based fiction is free. For the rest of this column, I'm going to focus on ebooks. Next time out, I'll point you at some of the new fiction websites.

Search Results

When I searched eBookAd.com, it turned up 592 science fiction titles. Here are some of the major players in ebook publishing.

Baen Books Webscriptions <*http://www.webscription.net*/> is "A web based re-creation of the serialized novel using Science Fiction published by Baen Books." For ten dollars a month, subscribers will have access to a directory containing serialized segments of books from the frontlist of Baen Books. Over the course of three months, the entire book will appear on the site. What is interesting about this deal is that subscribers will have the opportunity to read these books *prior* to print publication. In fact, the site includes a disclaimer stating that what will be posted before publication will be "un-proofed copy similar to galley copies." Once the book is released in print, all segments will be replaced with proofed copy. Of course, now that I've told you that an ebook preserves the look of print, I must contradict myself: Webscription ebooks will be posted in HTML. Despite this drawback, Webscriptions is the boldest foray any major SF publisher has made onto the net.

Byron Preiss's imprint **ibooks, inc.** <*http://www.ibooksinc.com*/> launched in September '99. Ibooks are published simultaneously on the net and in paper, where they are distributed by Simon and Schuster. The ibooks list concentrates on the backlist of such old masters as Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Alfred Bester, and Harry Harrison and franchise work, with a particular concentration in novels derived from Isaac's work. Prices range between eight and twelve dollars. The ibooks site has an ambitious offshoot at **The SciFiVine** <*http://www.thescifivine.com*> where you'll find a community of science fiction fans busily posting messages and chatting about the genre.

Back in May, Melisa and Richard Michaels started **Embiid Publishing** <*http://www.embiid.net*/>. "Part of our goal," writes Melisa, "was to get electronic publishing started in a more author-and-reader-friendly direction than paper publishing has gone." Between the two of them, they have a winning combination of talent and experience. Melisa, for example, is the author of ten novels and, until recently, was the webmas-

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ter and driving force behind one of the best science fiction sites on the web, that of the **Science Fiction Writers of America** <*http://www.sfwa.org*>. Thus far they have produced eighteen previously published books by an eclectic list of writers like Avram Davidson, William Sanders, Modean Moon, and Melisa herself. All their ebooks are encrypted for a proprietary Embiid Reader, freeware which can be used to read text files in any size up to 48 points. Also supported is the Rocket eBook format. Prices range from three to five dollars.

ElectricStory.com <*http://www.electricstory.com/*> is another brand new reprint site. Its list isn't that long yet, but it is *choice*, including novels and short story collections by Lucius Shepard, Terry Bisson, Tony Daniel, and Michael Bishop. Wonderful books by Howard Waldrop, Rudy Rucker, and Paul Park are soon to follow. The list price is $7.99 for each title but you may find them at a discount. You can't actually buy books at the site; instead you have to click to **Powells.com** <*http://www.powells.com*> or **Barnes&Noble.com** <*http://www.bn.com*>. But the ElectricStory site is well worth a visit for the freebies they offer. At this writing they include three stories from different collections on the list and Lucius Shepard's idiosyncratic and often hilarious movie reviews.

A friendly word of warning before I commend **Fictionwise** <*http://www.fictionwise.com*> to your attention. I have a financial relationship with this reprint short fiction site; you can buy some of my stories there. So where do I get off mentioning it? Here are ten good reasons, in alphabetical order: Gardner Dozois, Karen Haber, John Kessel, Damon Knight, Nancy Kress, Mike Resnick, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Robert Silverberg, Michael Swanwick and Kate Wilhelm. Fictionwise has managed to entice some of our most accomplished short fiction practitioners to post stories. And most are represented not with just a story or two, but with ten or more. Prices range from sixty cents to two dollars for individual stories; "bundles" of stories, collected either by theme or by individual writer, range from ten to twenty dollars. The simple fact is, that nowhere else on the web is there a larger collection of award-winning and award-nominated science fiction than at Fictionwise. So I apologize to those who think I'm using this space to flog my own product. Just skip my stuff and go for the Malzberg.

I'm not sure exactly what's going on with **e-reads.com** <*http://www.e-reads.com/*>. None of the links on their site are active. It could be that I just arrived before they were ready to do business. But their slogan "Bringing back the books you love by authors you remember," has a certain ring, don't you think. And some of their product is available now, even though their site isn't, from capable authors like Fritz Leiber, R. A. McAvoy, and Susan Schwartz.

Exit

At the start of the twenty-first century, editors and publishers may well feel as though they are laboring under the famous Chinese curse, "May you live in interesting times." It seems clear that the once staid publishing industry is in the midst of a revolution. As in any revolution, casualties are inevitable. It's likely that some of the new e-publishers may not survive. Similarly, it may be that some of the dinosaurs of print will go extinct, if they do not adapt to the changing digital environment.

Perhaps the most difficult problem e-publishers will face is finding a way to make money selling fiction

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on the net. Information wants to be free, or so they say. And if it isn't free, any number of netizens are willing to find ways to set it free. Hackers and data pirates have some print publishers scared silly. Sure you can Xerox a novel if you have a copier and a couple of hours, but who is going to go to all that trouble? But in a matter of minutes you can burn the complete works of Shakespeare onto a CD-ROM or send it through your broadband connection to Osaka, Oslo, and Oshkosh.

Writers too will face challenges. Will we see a kinder, gentler online publishing industry, one that is less driven by a best seller mentality? A publisher of ebooks has no need of a warehouse or a distribution system that deals with moving atoms from here to there. She can afford patience with a book, giving it time to find its audience. But then, how will ebooks find their audiences? Even if only a fraction of the greatest hits of the science fiction backlist becomes available, it will flood a market that already offers far, far too many choices. Is a new writer, promising but not yet in full cry, going to be able to compete against the collected works of Robert A. Heinlein?

What? You weren't expecting me to come up with the answers to these Big Questions, were you? If you were, it's a good thing I'm just about out of room for this installment. Besides, I'm better at reporting than punditry.

I'm just sitting here with my fingers curled over the keyboard, waiting for the next interesting site to jump off the screen. O

Chat online
with your favorite authors!

The Genome and SF **February 13 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**
Joan Slonczewski, Sarah Zettel, and Paul DiFilippo discuss the genome project, genetics, and genetic engineering.

SF and Gaming **February 27 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**
Marc Laidlaw (Half-Life), Greg Costikyan (Fantasy War), and Laura Mixon discuss SF in both computer and roleplaying games.

Go to **www.scifi.com/chat** or link to the chats via our home page (**www.asimovs.com**). Chats are held in conjunction with *Analog* and the Sci-fi Channel and are moderated by *Asimov's* editor, Gardner Dozois.

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The Days Between

Allen Steele

Illustration by Alan Gutierrez

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Allen Steele's brilliant new story (and, the author says, his "worst nightmare") is the second tale in the Coyote sequence that began with "Stealing Alabama" (January 2001). His next novel, *Chronospace*, which is an expansion of ". . . Where Angels Fear to Tread," (*Asimov's*, October/November 1997), will be published in hardcover by Ace in May—the same month that the paperback edition of his last book, *Oceanspace*, is scheduled for release.

Three months after leaving Earth, the URSS *Alabama* had just achieved cruise velocity when the accident occurred: Leslie Gillis woke up.

He regained consciousness slowly, as if emerging from a long and dreamless sleep. His body, naked and hairless, floated within the blue-green gelatin that filled the interior of his biostasis cell, an oxygen mask covering the lower part of his face and thin plastic tubes inserted in his arms. As his vision cleared, Gillis saw that the cell had been lowered to a horizontal position and that its fiberglass lid had folded open. The lighting within the hibernation deck was subdued, yet he had to open and close his eyes several times.

His first lucid thought was: *Thank God, I made it.*

His body felt weak, his limbs stiff. Just as he had been cautioned to do during flight training, he carefully moved only a little at a time. As Gillis gently flexed his arms and legs, he vaguely wondered why no one had come to his aid. Perhaps Dr. Okada was busy helping the others emerge from biostasis. Yet he could hear nothing save for a subliminal electrical hum; no voices, no movement.

His next thought was: *Something's wrong.*

Back aching, his arms feeling as if they were about to dislocate from his shoulders, Gillis grasped the sides of the cell and tried to sit up. For a minute or so he struggled against the phlegmatic embrace of the suspension fluid; there was a wet sucking sound as he prized his body upward, then the tubes went taut before he remembered that he had to take them out. Clenching his teeth, Gillis pinched off the tubes between thumb and forefinger and, one by one, carefully removed them from his arms. The oxygen mask came off last; the air was frigid and it stung his throat and lungs, and he coughed in agonized spasms as, with the last ounce of his strength, he clambered out of the tank. His legs couldn't hold him, and he collapsed upon the cold floor of the deck.

Gillis didn't know how long he lay curled in a fetal position, his hands tucked into his groin. He never really lost consciousness, yet for a long while his mind lingered somewhere between awareness and sleep, his unfocused eyes gazing at the burnished metal plates of the floor. After awhile the cold penetrated his dulled senses; the suspension fluid was freezing against his bare skin, and he dully realized that if he lay here much longer he would soon lapse into hypothermia.

Gillis rolled over on his back, forced himself to sit up. Aquamarine fluid drooled down his body, formed a shallow pool around his hips; he hugged his shoulders, rubbing his chilled flesh. Once again, he wondered why no one was paying any attention to him. Yes, he was only the communications officer, yet there were others farther up the command hierarchy who should have been revived by now. Kuniko Okada was the last person he had seen before the somatic drugs entered his system; as Chief Physician, she also

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would have been the last crew member to enter biostasis and the first to emerge. She would have then brought up—Gillis sought to remember specific details—the Chief Engineer, Dana Monroe, who would have then ascertained that *Alabama*'s major systems were operational. If the ship was in nominal condition, Captain Lee would have been revived next, shortly followed by First Officer Shapiro, Executive Officer Tinsley, Senior Navigator Ullman, and then Gillis himself. Yes, that was the correct procedure.

So where was everyone else?

First things first. He was wet and naked, and the ship's internal temperature had been lowered to 50 degrees. He had to find some clothes. His teeth chattering, Gillis staggered to his feet, then lurched across the deck to a nearby locker. Opening it, he found a stack of clean white towels and a pile of folded robes. As he wiped the moist gel from his body, he recalled his embarrassment when his turn had come for Kuniko to prepare him for hibernation. It was bad enough to have his body shaved, yet when her electric razor had descended to his pubic area he found himself becoming involuntarily aroused by her gentle touch. Amused by his reaction, she had smiled at him in a motherly way. *Just relax,* she said. *Think about something else. . . .*

He turned, and for the first time saw the rest of the biostasis cells were still upright within their niches. Thirteen white fiberglass coffins, each resting at a forty-five degree angle within the bulkhead walls of Deck C2A. Electrophoretic displays on their lids emitted a warm amber glow, showing the status of the crewmembers contained within. Here was the *Alabama*'s command team, just as he had last seen them: Lee, Shapiro, Tinsley, Okada, Monroe, Ullman. . . .

Everyone was still asleep. Everyone except himself.

Gillis hastily pulled on a robe, then strode across the deck to the nearest window. Its outer shutter was closed, yet when he pressed the button that moved it upward, all he saw were distant stars against black space. Of course, he might not be able to see 47 Ursae Majoris from this particular porthole. He needed to get to the command center, check the navigation instruments.

As he turned from the window, something caught his eye: the readout on the nearest biostasis cell. Trembling with unease as much as cold, Gillis moved closer to examine it. The screen identified the sleeper within as *Cortez, Raymond B.*—Ray Cortez, the life-support chief—and all his lifesigns seemed normal as far as he could tell, yet that wasn't what attracted his attention. On the upper left side was a time-code:

E/: 7.8.70 / 22:10:01 GMT

July 8, 2070. That was the date everyone had entered hibernation, three days after the *Alabama* had made its unscheduled departure from Highgate. On the upper right side of the screen, though, was another time-code:

P/: 10.3.70 / 00.21.23 GMT

October 3, 2070. Today's date and time.

The *Alabama* had been in flight for only three months. Three months of a voyage across forty-six light-years which, at 20 percent of light-speed, would take more 230 years to complete.

For several long minutes, Gillis stared at the readout, unwilling to believe the evidence of his own eyes. Then he turned and walked across the compartment to the manhole. His bare feet slapping against the cool metal rungs, he climbed down the ladder to the next deck of the hibernation module.

Fourteen more biostasis cells, all within their niches. None were open.

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Fighting panic, Gillis scrambled further down the ladder to Deck C2C. Again, fourteen closed cells.

Still clutching at some intangible shred of hope, Gillis quickly visited Deck C2D, then he scurried back up the ladder and entered the short tunnel leading to the *Alabama*'s second hibernation module. By the time he reached Deck C1D, he had checked every biostasis cell belonging to the starship's one hundred and three remaining passengers, yet he hadn't found one which was open.

He sagged against a bulkhead, and for a long time he could do nothing except tremble with fear.

He was alone.

After awhile, Gillis pulled himself together. All right, something had obviously gone wrong. The computers controlling the biostasis systems had made a critical error and had prematurely awakened him from hibernation. Okay, then; all he had to do was put himself back into the loop.

The robe he had found wasn't very warm, so he made his way through the circular passageway connecting the ship's seven ring modules until he entered C4, one of two modules that would serve as crew quarters once the *Alabama* reached 47 Ursae Majoris. He tried not to look at the rows of empty bunks as he searched for the locker where he had stowed his personal belongings. His blue jumpsuit was where he had left it three months ago, hanging next to the isolation garment he had worn when he left Gingrich Space Center to board the shuttle up to the Highgate; on a shelf above it, next to his high-top sneakers, was the small cardboard box containing the precious few mementos he had been permitted to take with him. Gillis deliberately ignored the box as he pulled on his jumpsuit; he'd look at the stuff inside once he reached his final destination, and that wouldn't be for another 230 years . . . 226 years, if you considered the time-dilation factor.

The command center, located on Deck H4 within the ship's cylindrical hub, was cold and dark. The lights had been turned down and the rectangular windows along its circular hull were shuttered; only the soft glow emitted by a few control panels pierced the gloom. Gillis took a moment to switch on the ceiling lights; spotting the environmental control station, he briefly considered adjusting the thermostat to make things a bit warmer, then decided against it. He had been trained as a communications specialist; his technical understanding of the rest of the *Alabama*'s major systems was cursory at best, and he was reluctant to make any changes that might influence the ship's operating condition. Besides, he wasn't staying here for very long; once he returned to biostasis, the cold wouldn't make much difference to him.

All the same, it was his duty to check the ship's status, so he walked over to the nav table, pulled away the plastic cover which protected its keypad, and punched up a display of the *Alabama*'s present position. A bright shaft of light appeared above the table, and within it appeared a tiny holographic model of the ship. It floated in midair at the end of a long curved string that led outward from the center of the three-dimensional halo representing the orbits of the major planets of the solar system. Moving at constant 1-g thrust, the *Alabama* was already beyond the orbit of Neptune; the ship was now passing the canted orbit of Pluto, and in a few weeks it would cross the heliopause, escaping the last weak remnants of the Sun's gravitational pull as it headed into interstellar space.

The *Alabama* had now traveled farther from Earth than any previous

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manned spacecraft; only a few space probes had ever ventured this far. Gillis found himself smiling at the thought. He was now the only living person—the only conscious living person, at least—to have voyaged so far from Earth. A feat almost worth waking up for . . . although, all things considered, he would have preferred to sleep through it.

He moved to the engineering station, uncovered its console, and pulled up a schematic display of the main engine. The deuterium/helium-3 reserves that had been loaded aboard the *Alabama*'s spherical main fuel tank before launch had been largely consumed during the ninety-day boost phase, but now that the ship had reached cruise speed, the magnetic field projected by its Bussard ramscoop was drawing ionized interstellar hydrogen and helium from a 4,000 kilometer radius in front of the ship, feeding the fusion reactor at its stern and thus maintaining a constant .2c velocity. Microsecond pulsations of the same magnetic field enabled it to simultaneously perform as a shield, deflecting away the interstellar dust that, at relativistic velocities, would have soon shredded the *Alabama*'s hull. Gillis's knowledge of the ship's propulsion systems was limited, yet his brief examination showed him that they were operating at 90 percent efficiency.

Something softly tapped against the floor behind him.

Startled by the unexpected sound, Gillis turned around, peered into the semi-darkness. For a few moments he saw nothing, then a small shape emerged from behind the nav table: one of the spider-like autonomous maintenance robots that constantly prowled the *Alabama,* inspecting its compartments and making minor repairs. This one had apparently been attracted to Gillis's presence within the command deck; its eyestalks briefly flicked in his direction, then the 'bot scuttled away.

Well, then. So much the better. The 'bot was no more intelligent than a mouse, but it reported everything that it observed to the ship's AI. Now that the ship was aware that one of its passengers was awake, the time had come for Gillis to take care of his little problem.

Gillis crossed the deck to his customary post at the communications station. Sitting down in his chair, he pulled away the plastic cover; a few deft taps on the keyboard and his console glowed to life once more. Seeing the familiar screens and readouts made him feel a little more secure; here, at least, he knew what he was doing. He typed in the commands that opened an interface to *Alabama*'s DNA-based artificial intelligence.

Gillis, Leslie, Lt. Com. I.D. 86419-D. Password Scotland.

The response was immediate: I.D. confirmed. Password accepted. Good morning, Mr. Gillis. May I help you?

Why was I awakened? Gillis typed.

A short pause, then: Gillis, Leslie, Lt. Com. is still in biostasis.

Gillis's mouth fell open: What the hell. . . ?

No, I'm not. I'm here in the command center. You've confirmed that yourself.

This time, the AI's response seemed a fraction of a second slower. Lt. Com. Leslie Gillis is still in biostasis. Please re-enter your I.D. and password for reconfirmation.

Impatiently, Gillis typed: I.D. 86419-D. Password Scotland.

The AI came back at once: Identification reconfirmed. You are Lt. Com. Leslie Gillis.

Then you agree that I'm no longer in biostasis.

No. Lt. Com. Leslie Gillis remains in biostasis. Please re-enter your I.D. and password for reconfirmation.

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Gillis angrily slammed his hands against the console. He shut his eyes and took a deep breath, then forced himself to think this through as calmly as he could. He was dealing with an AI; it might be conditioned to respond to questions posed to it in plain English, yet nonetheless it was a machine, operating with machine-like logic. Although he had to deal with it on its own terms, nonetheless he had to establish the rules.

I.D. 86419-D. Password Scotland.

Identification reconfirmed. You are Lt. Com. Leslie Gillis.

Please locate Lt. Com. Leslie Gillis.

Lt. Com. Leslie Gillis is in biostasis cell C1A-07.

Okay, now they were getting somewhere . . . but this was clearly wrong, in more ways than one. He had just emerged from a cell located on Deck A of Module C2.

Who is the occupant of biostasis cell C2A-07?

Gunther, Eric, Ensign/FSA

The name was unfamiliar, but the suffix indicated that he was a Federal Space Agency ensign. A member of the flight crew who had been ferried up to the *Alabama* just before launch, but probably not one of the conspirators who had hijacked the ship.

Gillis typed: There has been a mistake. Eric Gunther is not in cell C2A-07, and I am not in cell C1A-07. Do you understand?

Another pause, then: Acknowledged. Biostasis cell assignments rechecked with secondary data system. Correction: cell C1A-07 presently occupied by Eric Gunther.

Gillis absently gnawed on a fingernail; after a few minutes he developed a possible explanation for the switch. Captain Lee and the other conspirators had smuggled almost fifty dissident intellectuals on board just before the *Alabama* fled Earth; since none of them had been listed in the ship's original crew manifest, the D.I.'s had to be assigned to biostasis cells previously reserved for the members of the colonization team who had been left behind on Earth. Gillis could only assume that, at some point during the confusion, someone had accidentally fed erroneous information to the computer controlling the biostasis systems. Therefore, although he was originally assigned to C1A-07 while Ensign Gunther was supposed to be in C2A-07, whoever had switched his and Gunther's cells had also neglected to cross-feed this information from the biostasis control system to the ship's AI. In the long run, it was a small matter of substituting one single digit for another. . . .

Yet this didn't answer the original question: why had he been prematurely revived from biostasis? Or rather, why was Gunther supposed to be revived?

Why did you revive the occupant of cell C2A-07?

CLASSIFIED/TS. ISA Order 7812-DA

What the. . . ? Why was there an Internal Security Agency lock-out? Yet he was able to get around that.

Security override AS-001001, Gillis, Leslie, Lt. Com. password Scotland. Repeat question: why did you revive the occupant of cell C2A-07?

CLASSIFIED/TS: OPEN. Ensign Gunther was to confirm Presidential launch authorization via secure communication channel. Upon failure to confirm authorization by 7.5.70/00.00, Ensign Gunther was to be revived from biostasis at 10.3.70/00.00 and given the option of terminating the mission.

Gillis stared at the screen for a long while, comprehending what he had just read but nonetheless not quite believing it. This could only mean one

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thing: Gunther had been an ISA mole placed aboard the *Alabama* for the purpose of assuring that the ship wasn't launched without Presidential authorization. However, since Captain Lee had ordered Gillis himself to shut down all modes of communication between Mission Control and the *Alabama,* Gunther hadn't been able to send a covert transmission back to Earth. Therefore the AI had been programmed to revive him from biostasis ninety days after launch.

At this point, though, Gunther wouldn't have been able to simply turn the ship around even if he'd wanted to do so. The *Alabama* was too far from Earth, its velocity too high, for one person to accomplish such a task on his own. So there was no mistake what "terminating the mission" meant; Gunther was supposed to have destroyed the *Alabama.*

A loyal citizen of the United Republic of America, even to the point of suicide. Indeed, Gillis had little doubt that the Republic's official press agency had already reported the loss of the *Alabama,* and that FSA spokesmen were issuing statements to the effect that the ship had suffered a catastrophic accident.

Since no one else aboard, the ship knew about Gunther's orders, the AI's hidden program hadn't been deleted from memory. On one hand, at least he had been prevented from carrying out his suicide mission. On the other, Gunther would remain asleep for the next 230 years while Gillis was now wide-awake.

Very well. So now all he had to do was join him in biostasis. Once he woke up again, Gillis could inform Captain Lee of what he had learned, and let him decide what to do with Ensign Gunther.

There has been a mistake. I was not supposed to be revived at this time. I have to return to biostasis immediately.

A pause, then: This is not possible. You cannot return to biostasis.

Gillis's heart skipped a beat.

I repeat: there has been a mistake. There was no reason to revive the person in cell C2A-07. I was the occupant of cell C2A-07, and I need to return to biostasis at once.

I understand the situation. The crew manifest has been changed to reflect this new information. However, it is impossible for you to return to biostasis.

His hands trembled upon the keyboard: Why not?

Protocol does not allow for the occupant of cell C2A-07 to resume biostasis. This cell has been permanently deactivated. Resumption of biostasis is not admissible.

Gillis suddenly felt as if a hot towel had been wrapped around his face. Security override B-001001, Gillis, Leslie, Lt. Com. Password Scotland. Delete protocol immediately.

Password accepted, Lt. Gillis. Protocol cannot be deleted without direct confirmation of Presidential launch authorization, and may not be rescinded by anyone other than Ensign Gunther.

Anger surged within him. He typed: Revive Ensign Gunther at once. This is an emergency.

No members of the crew may be revived from biostasis until the ship has reached its final destination unless there is a mission-critical emergency. All systems are at nominal status: there is no mission-critical emergency.

Eric Gunther. Eric Gunther lay asleep on Deck C1A. Yet even if he could be awakened from hibernation and forced to confess his role, there was little he could do about it now. The long swath of ionized particles the *Alabama*

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left in its wake rendered impossible radio communications with Earth; any signals received by or sent from the starship would be fuzzed out while the fusion engines were firing, and the *Alabama* would remain under constant thrust for the next 230 years.

If I don't return to biostasis, then I'll die. This is an emergency. Do you understand?

I understand your situation, Mr. Gillis. However, it does not pose a mission-critical emergency. I apologize for the error.

Reading this, Gillis found himself smiling. The smile became a grin, and from somewhere within his grin a wry chuckle slowly fought through. The chuckle evolved into hysterical laughter, for by now Gillis had realized the irony of his situation.

He was the Chief Communications Officer of the URSS *Alabama*. And he was doomed because he couldn't communicate.

Gillis had his pick of any berth aboard the ship, including Captain Lee's private quarters, yet he chose the bunk that had been assigned to him; it only seemed right. He reset the thermostat to 71 degrees, then he took a long, hot shower. Putting on his jumpsuit again, he returned to his berth, lay down, and tried to sleep. Yet every time he shut his eyes, new thoughts entered his mind, and soon he would find himself staring at the bunk above him. So he lay there for a long time, his hands folded together across his stomach as he contemplated his situation.

He wouldn't asphyxiate nor perish from lack of water. *Alabama*'s closed-loop life-support system would purge the carbon dioxide from the ship's air and recirculate it as breathable oxygen-nitrogen, and his urine would be purified and recycled as potable water. Neither would he freeze to death in the dark; the fusion engines generated sufficient excess energy for him to be able to run the ship's internal electrical systems without fear of exhausting its reserves. Nor would he have to worry about starvation; there were enough rations aboard to feed a crew of 104 passengers for twelve months, which meant that one person would have enough to eat for over a century.

Yet there was little chance that he would last that long. Within their biostasis cells, the remaining crew members would be constantly rejuvenated, their natural aging processes held at bay through homeostatic stem-cell regeneration, teleomerase enzyme therapy, and nanotechnical repair of vital organs, while infusion of somatic drugs would keep them in a coma-like condition that would deprive them of subconscious dream-sleep. Once they reached 47 Ursae Majoris, they would emerge from hibernation—even that term was a misnomer, for they would never stir from their long rest—just the same way as they had been when they entered the cells

Not so for him. Now that he was removed from biostasis, he would continue to age normally. Or at least as normally as one would while traveling at relativistic velocity; if he were suddenly spirited back home and was met by a hypothetical twin brother—no chance of that happening; like so many others aboard, Gillis was an only child—he would discover that he had aged only a few hours less than his sibling. Yet that gap would gradually widen the farther *Alabama* traveled from Earth, and even the Lorentz factor wouldn't save him in the long run, for everyone else aboard the ship was aging at the same rate; the only difference was that their bodies would remain perpetually youthful, while his own would gradually break down, grow old . . .

No. Gillis forcefully shut his eyes. *Don't think about it.*

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But there was no way of getting around it: he was now living under a death sentence. Yet a condemned man in solitary confinement has some sort of personal contact, even if it's only the fleeting glimpse of a guard's hand as he shoves a tray of food through the cell door. Gillis didn't have that luxury. Never again would he ever hear another voice, see another face. There were a dozen or so people back home he had loved, and another dozen or so he had loathed, and countless others he had met, however briefly, during the twenty-eight years he had spent on Earth. All gone, lost forever. . . .

He sat up abruptly. A little too abruptly; he slammed the top of his head against the bunk above him. He cursed beneath his breath, rubbed his skull—a small bump beneath his hair, nothing more—then he swung his legs over the side of his bunk, stood up, and opened his locker. His box was where he had last seen it; he took it down from the shelf, started to open it. . . .

And then he stopped himself. No. If he looked inside now, the things he'd left in there would make him only more miserable than he already was. His fingers trembled upon the lid. He didn't need this now. He shoved the box back into the locker and slammed the door shut behind it. Then, having nothing else better to do, he decided to take a walk.

The ring corridor led him around the hub to Module C7, where he climbed down to the mess deck: long empty benches, walls painted in muted earth tones. The deck below contained the galley: chrome tables, cooking surfaces, empty warm refrigerators. He located the coffee maker, but there was no coffee to be found, so he ventured further down the ladder to the ship's med deck. Antiseptic white-on-white compartments, the examination beds covered with plastic sheets; cabinets contained cellophane-wrapped surgical instruments, gauze and bandages, and rows of plastic bottles containing pharmaceuticals with arcane labels. He had a slight headache, so he searched through them until he found some ibuprofen; he took the pill without water and lay down for a few minutes.

After awhile his headache went away, so he decided to check out the wardroom on the bottom level. It was sparsely furnished, only a few chairs and tables beneath a pair of wallscreens, with a single couch facing a closed porthole. One of the tables folded open to reveal a holographic game board; he pressed a button marked by a knight piece and watched as a chess set materialized. He used to play chess assiduously when he was a teenager, but had gradually lost interest as he grew older. Perhaps it was time to pick it up again. . . .

Instead, though, he went over to the porthole. Opening the shutter, he gazed out into space. Although astronomy had always been a minor hobby, he could see none of the familiar constellations; this far from Earth, the stars had changed position so radically that only the AI's navigation subroutine could accurately locate them. Even the stars were strangers now; this revelation made him feel even more lonely, so he closed the shutter. He didn't bother to turn off the game table before he left the compartment.

As he walked along the ring corridor, he came up on a lone 'bot. It quickly scuttled out of his way as he approached, but Gillis squatted down on his haunches and tapped his fingers against the deck, trying to coax it closer. The robot's eyestalks twitched briefly toward him; for a moment, it seemed to hesitate, then it quickly turned away and went up the circular passageway. It had no reason to have any interaction with humans, even those who desired its company. Gillis watched the 'bot as it disappeared above the ceiling, then he reluctantly rose and continued up the corridor.

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The cargo modules, C5 and C6, were dark and cold, deck upon deck of color-coded storage lockers and shipping containers. He found the crew rations on Deck C5A; sliding open one of the refrigerated lockers, he took a few minutes to inspect its contents: vacuum-sealed plastic bags containing freeze-dried substances identified only by cryptic labels. None of it looked very appetizing; the dark-brown slab within the bag he pulled out at random could have been anything from processed beef to chocolate cake. He wasn't hungry yet, so he shoved it back in and slammed the locker shut.

Gillis returned to the ring corridor and walked to the hatch leading to the hub access shaft. As he opened the hatch, though, he hesitated before grasping the top rung of the shaft's recessed ladder. He had climbed down the shaft once before already, yet he had been so determined to reach the command deck that he had failed to recognize it for what it was, a narrow well almost a hundred feet deep. While the *Alabama* was moored at Highgate and in zero-gee, everyone aboard had treated it as a tunnel, yet now what had once been horizontal was now vertical.

He looked down. Far below, five levels beneath him, lay the hard metal floor of Deck H5. If his hands ever slipped on the ladder, if his feet failed to rest safely upon one of its rungs, then he could fall all the way to the bottom. He would have to be careful every time he climbed the shaft, for if he ever had an accident. . . .

The trick was never looking down. He purposely watched his hands as he made his way down the ladder.

Gillis meant to stop on H2 and H3 to check the engineering and life-support decks, yet somehow he found himself not stopping until he reached H5.

The EVA deck held three airlocks. To his right and left were the hatches leading to the *Alabama*'s twin shuttles, the *Wallace* and the *Helms*. Gillis gazed through porthole at the *Helms*; the spaceplane was nestled within its docking cradle, its delta wings folded beneath its broad fuselage, its bubble canopy covered by shutters. For a moment, he had an insane urge to steal the *Helms* and fly it back home, yet that was clearly impossible; the shuttles only had sufficient fuel and oxygen reserves for orbital sorties. He wouldn't get so far as even Neptune, let alone Earth. And besides, he had never been trained to pilot a shuttle.

Turning away from the porthole, he caught sight of another airlock located on the opposite side of the deck. This one didn't lead to a shuttle docking collar; it was the airlock that led outside the ship.

Reluctantly, almost against his own will, Gillis found himself walking toward it. He twisted the lockwheel to undog the inner hatch, then pulled it open and stepped inside. The airlock was a small white compartment barely large enough to hold two men wearing hardsuits. On the opposite side was the tiger-striped outer hatch with a small control panel mounted on the bulkhead next to it. The panel had only three major buttons—*Pres.*, *Purge*, and *Open*—and above them were three lights: green, orange, and red. The green light was now lit, showing that the inner hatch was open and the airlock was safely pressurized.

The airlock was cold. The rest of the ship had warmed up by now, but here Gillis could feel the arctic chill creeping through his jumpsuit, see every exhalation as ghostly wisps rising past his face. He didn't know how long he remained there, yet he regarded the three buttons for a very long time.

After awhile, he realized that his stomach was beginning to rumble, so he backed out of the compartment. He carefully closed the inner hatch, and lin-

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gered outside the airlock for another minute or so before he decided that this was one part of the ship he didn't want to visit very often.

Then he made the long climb back up the access shaft.

There were chronometers everywhere, displaying both Greenwich Mean Time and relativistic shiptime. On the second day after revival, Gillis decided that he'd rather not know what the date was, so he found a roll of black electrical tape and went through the entire ship, masking every clock he could find.

There were no natural day or night cycles aboard the ship. He slept when he was tired, and got out of bed when he felt like it. After awhile, he found that he was spending countless hours lying in his bunk, doing nothing more than staring at the ceiling, thinking about nothing. This wasn't good, so he made a regular schedule for himself.

He reset the ship's internal lighting so that it turned on and off at twelve-hour intervals, giving him an semblance of sunrise and sunset. He started his mornings by jogging around the ring corridor, keeping it up until his legs ached and his breath came in ragged gasps, and then sprinting the final lap.

Next he would take a shower, and then attend to himself. When his beard began to grow back, he made a point of shaving every day, and when his hair started to get a little too long he trimmed it with a pair of surgical scissors he found in the med deck; the result was a chopped, butch-cut look, but so long as he managed to keep the hair out of his eyes and off his neck he was satisfied. Otherwise, he tried to avoid looking closely at himself in the mirror.

Once he was dressed, he would visit the galley to make breakfast: cold cereal, rehydrated vegetable juice, a couple of fruit squares, a mug of hot coffee. He liked to open a porthole and look out at the stars while he ate.

Then he would go below to the wardroom and activate the wallscreens. He was able to access countless hours of datafiche through the AI's library subroutine, yet precious little of it was intended for entertainment. Instead, what he found were mainly tutorials: service manuals for the *Alabama*'s major operating systems, texts on agriculture, astrobiology, land management, academic studies of historical colonies on Earth, so forth and so on. Nonetheless he devoted himself to studying everything he could find, pretending as if he was once again a first-year plebe at the Academy of the Republic, memorizing everything and then silently quizzing himself to make sure he got it right. Perhaps it was pointless—there was no reason for him to learn about organic methods of soybean cultivation—yet it helped to keep his mind occupied.

Although he learned much about the *Alabama*'s biostasis systems he hadn't known before, he never found anything that would help him return to hibernation. He eventually returned to Deck C2B, closed the hatch of his former cell, and returned it to its niche. After that, he tried not to go there again; like the EVA airlock on Deck H5, this was a place that made him uncomfortable.

When he was tired of studying, he would play chess for hours upon end, matching his wits against the game system. The outcome was always inevitable, for the computer could never be defeated, but he gradually learned how to anticipate its next move and forestall another loss for at least a little while longer.

The food was bland, preprocessed stuff, artificial substitutes for meat,

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fruit, and vegetables meant to remain edible after years of long-term freezer storage, but he did the best to make dinner more tolerable. Once he learned how to interpret the labels, he selected a variety of different rations and moved them to the galley. He spent considerable time and effort making each meal a little better, or at least different, from the last one; often the results were dismal, but now and then he managed to concoct something he wouldn't mind eating again—stir-fried chicken and pineapple over linguine, for instance, wasn't as strange as he thought it might be—and then he could type the recipe into the galley computer for future reference.

While wandering through the ship in search of something else to divert his attention, he found a canvas duffel bag. It belonged to Jorge Montero, one of the D.I.'s who had helped the *Alabama* escape from Earth; apparently he had managed to bring a small supply of books with him. Most were wilderness-survival manuals of one sort of another, yet among them were a few twentieth-century classics: J. Bronowski's *The Ascent of Man,* Kenneth Brower's *The Starship and the Canoe,* Frank Herbert's *Dune*. Gillis took them back to his berth and put them aside as bedtime reading.

On occasion, he would visit the command deck. The third time he did this, the nav table showed him that the *Alabama* had crossed the heliopause; the ship was now traveling through interstellar space, the dark between the stars. Because the ramscoop blocked the view, there were no windows that faced directly ahead, yet he learned how to manipulate the cameras located on the fuel tank until they displayed a real-time image forward of the ship's bow. It appeared as if the stars directly in front had clustered together, the Doppler effect causing them to form short comet-like tails tinged with blue. Yet when he rotated the camera to look back the way he had come, he saw that an irregular black hole had opened behind the *Alabama*; the Sun and all its planets, including Earth, had become invisible.

This was one more thing that disturbed him, so he seldom activated the cameras.

He slept, and he jogged, and he ate, and he studied, and he played long and futile chess games, and otherwise did everything possible to pass the time as best he could. Every now and then he caught himself murmuring to himself, carrying on conversations with only his own mind as a companion; when this happened, he would consciously shut up. Yet no matter how far he managed to escape from himself, he always had to return to the silence of the ship's corridors, the emptiness of its compartments.

He didn't know it then, but he was beginning to go insane.

His jumpsuit began to get worn out. It was the only thing he had to wear, though, besides his robe, so he checked the cargo manifest and found that clothing was stowed in Deck C5C, and it was while searching for them that he discovered the liquor supply.

There wasn't supposed to be any booze aboard the *Alabama,* yet nonetheless someone had managed to smuggle two cases of scotch, two cases of vodka, and one case of champagne onto the ship. They were obviously put there to help the crew celebrate their safe arrival at 47 Ursae Majoris; Gillis found them stashed among the spare clothing.

He tried to ignore the liquor for as long as possible; he had never been much of a drinker, and he didn't want to start now. But several days later, after another attempt at making beef stroganoff resulted in a tasteless mess of half-cooked noodles and beef-substitute, he found himself wander-

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ing back to C5C and pulling out a bottle of scotch. He brought it back to the wardroom, poured a couple of fingers in a glass and stirred in some tapwater, then sat down to play another game of chess. After his second drink, he found himself feeling more at ease than he had since his untimely awakening; the next evening, he did the same thing again.

That was the beginning of his dark times.

"Cocktail hour" soon became the highlight of his day; after awhile, he found no reason to wait until after dinner, and instead had his first drink during his afternoon chess game. One morning he decided that a glass of champagne would be the perfect thing to top off his daily run, so he opened a bottle after he showered and shaved, and continued to indulge himself during the rest of the day. He discovered that powdered citrus juice was an adequate mixer for vodka, so he added a little of that to his morning breakfast, and it wasn't long before he took to carrying around a glass of vodka wherever he went. He tried to ration the liquor supply as much as he could, yet he found himself depressed whenever he finished a bottle, and relieved to discover that there always seemed to be one more to replace it. At first he told himself that he had to leave some for the others—after all, it was meant for their eventual celebration—but in time that notion faded to the back of his mind, and was finally forgotten altogether.

He went to sleep drunk, often in the wardroom, and awoke to nasty hangovers that only a hair of the dog could help dispel. His clothes began to smell of stale booze; he soon got tired of washing them, and simply found another jumpsuit to wear. Unwashed plates and cookware piled up in the galley sink, and it always seemed as if there were empty or half-empty glasses scattered throughout the ship. He stopped jogging after awhile, but he didn't gain much weight because he had lost his appetite and was now eating less than before. And every day, he found a new source of irritation: the inconvenient times when the lights turned on and off, or how the compartments always seemed too hot or too cold, or why he could never find something that he needed.

One night, frustrated at having lost at chess yet again, he picked up his chair and slammed it through the game table's glass panel. He was still staring at the wrecked table when one of the 'bots arrived to investigate; deciding that its companionship was better than none at all, he sat down on the floor and tried to get it to come closer, cooing to it in the same way he had summoned his puppy back when he was a boy. The 'bot ignored him completely, and that enraged him even further, so he found an empty champagne bottle and used it to demolish the machine. Remarkably, the bottle remained intact even after the 'bot had become a broken, useless thing in the middle of the wardroom floor; even more remarkably, it didn't shatter the porthole when Gillis hurled it against the window.

He didn't remember what happened after that; he simply blacked out. The next thing he knew, he was sprawled across the floor of the airlock.

The harsh clang of an alarm threatened to split his skull in half. Dully surprised to find where he was, he clumsily raised himself up on his elbows and regarded his surroundings through swollen eyes. He was naked; his jumpsuit lay in an heap just within the inner hatch, which was shut. There was a large pool of vomit nearby, but he couldn't recall having thrown up any more than he could remember getting here from the wardroom.

Lights strobed within the tiny compartment. Rolling over on his side, he peered at the control panel next to the outer hatch. The orange button in its

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center was lit, and the red one beneath it flashed on and off. The airlock was ready to be opened without prior decompression; this was what had triggered the alarm.

Gillis had no idea how he got here, but it was obvious what he had almost done. He crawled across the airlock floor and slapped his hand against the green button; that stopped the alarm. Then he opened the inner hatch and, without bothering to pick up his discarded jumpsuit, staggered out of the airlock. He couldn't keep his balance, though, so he fell to his hands and knees and threw up again.

Then he rolled over on his side, curled in upon himself, and wept hysterically until sleep mercifully came to him. Naked and miserable, he passed out on the floor of the EVA deck.

The following day, Gillis methodically went through the entire ship, gathering the few remaining bottles and returning them to the locker where he had found them. Although he was tempted to jettison them into space, he was scared to return to Deck H5. Besides, there wasn't much booze left; during his long binge, he had managed to put away all but two bottles of scotch, one bottle of vodka, and four bottles of champagne.

The face that stared back at him from the mirror was unshaven and haggard, its eyes rimmed with dark circles. He was too tired to get rid of the beard, though, so he clipped it short with his scissors and let his hair remain at shoulder length. It was a new look for him, and he couldn't decide whether he liked it or not. Not that he cared much any more.

It took a couple of days for him to want to eat again, and even longer before he had a good night's sleep. More than a few times he was tempted to have another drink, but the memory of that terrifying moment in the airlock was enough to keep him away from the bottle.

Yet he never returned to the daily schedule he had previously set for himself. He lost interest in his studies, and he watched the few movies stored in the library until he found himself able to recite the characters' lines from memory. The game table couldn't be repaired, so he never played chess again. He went jogging now and then, but only when there was nothing else to do, and not for very long.

He spent long hours lying on his bunk, staring into the deepest recesses of his memory. He replayed events from his childhood—small incidents with his mother and father, the funny and stupid things he had done when he was a kid—and thought long and hard about the mistakes he had made during his journey to adulthood. He thought about the girls he had known, refought old quarrels with ancient enemies, remembered good times with old friends, yet in the end he always came back to where he was.

Sometimes he went down to the command deck. He had long since given up on trying to have meaningful conversation with the AI; it only responded to direct questions, and even then in a perfunctory way. Instead, he opened the porthole shutters, and slumped in Captain Lee's chair while he stared at the distant and motionless stars.

One day, on impulse, he got up from the chair and walked to the nearest console. He hesitated for a moment, then he reached down and gently peeled back the strip of black tape he had fastened across the chronometer. It read:

P:/ 4.17.71 / 18.32.06 GMT

April 17, 2071. A little more six months had gone by since his awakening.

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He could have sworn it had been six years.

That evening, Gillis prepared dinner with special care. He selected the best cut of processed beef he could find in the storage locker and marinated it in a pepper sauce he had learned to make, and carefully sautéed the dried garlic before he added it to the mashed potatoes; while the asparagus steamed in lemon juice, he grilled the beef to medium-rare perfection. Earlier in the afternoon he had chosen a bottle of champagne from the liquor supply, which he put aside until everything else was ready. He cleaned up the wardroom and laid a single setting for himself at a table facing the porthole, and just before dinner he dimmed the ceiling lights.

He ate slowly, savoring every bite, closing his eyes from time to time as he allowed his mind's eye to revisit some of the fine restaurants at which he had once dined: a steakhouse in downtown Kansas City, a five-star Italian restaurant in Boston's Beacon Hill neighborhood, a seafood place on St. Simon's Island where the lobster came straight from the wharf. When he gazed out the porthole he didn't attempt to pick out constellations, but simply enjoyed the silent majesty of the stars; when he was through with dinner, he carefully laid his knife and fork together on his plate, refilled his glass with champagne, and walked over to a couch, where he had earlier placed one last thing to round off a perfect evening.

Gillis had deliberately refrained from opening the box he kept in his locker; even during his worst moments, the lowest depths of his long binge, he had deliberately stayed away from it. Now the time had come for him to open the box, see what was inside.

He pulled out the photographs one at a time, studying them closely as he remembered the places where they had been taken, the years of his life that they represented. Here was his father; here was his mother; here he was at age seven, standing in the backyard of his childhood home in North Carolina, proudly holding aloft a toy spaceship he had been given for his birthday. Here was a snapshot of the first girl he had ever loved; here were several photos he had taken of her during a camping trip to the Smoky Mountains. Here was himself in his dress uniform during graduation exercises at the Academy; here he was during flight training in Texas. These images, and many more like them, were all he had brought with him from Earth: pictures from his past, small reminders of the places he had gone, the people whom he had known and loved.

Looking through them, he tried not to think about what he was about to do. He had reset the thermostat to lower the ship's internal temperature to 50 degrees at midnight, and he had instructed the AI to ignore the artificial day-night cycle he had previously programmed. He had left a note in Captain Lee's quarters, informing him that Eric Gunther was a saboteur and apologizing for having deprived the rest of the crew of rations and liquor. He would finish this bottle of champagne, though; no sense in letting it go to waste, and perhaps it would be easier to push the red button if he was drunk.

His life was over. There was nothing left for him. A few moments of agony would be a fair exchange for countless days of lonesome misery.

Gillis was still leafing through the photographs when he happened to glance up at the porthole, and it was at that moment when he noticed something peculiar: one of the stars was moving.

At first, he thought the champagne was getting to him. That, or it was a

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refraction of starlight caused by the tears which clung to the corners of his eyes. He returned his attention to a picture he had taken of his father shortly before he died. Then, almost reluctantly, he raised his head once more.

The window was filled with stars, all of them stationary . . . save one.

A bright point of light, so brilliant that it could have been a planet, perhaps even a comet. Yet the *Alabama* was now far beyond the Earth's solar system, and the stars were too distant to be moving relative to the ship's velocity. Yet this one seemed to be following a course parallel to his own.

His curiosity aroused, Gillis watched the faraway light as it moved across the starscape. The longer he looked at it, the more it appeared as if it had a faint blue-white tail; it might be a comet, but if it was, it was headed in the wrong direction. Indeed, as he continued to study it, the light became a little brighter and seemed to make a subtle shift in direction, almost as if . . .

The photos fell to the floor as he rushed toward the ladder.

By the time he reached the command deck, though, the object had vanished.

Gillis spent the next several hours searching the sky, using the navigational telescope in an attempt to catch another glimpse of the anomaly. When optical methods failed, he went to his com station and ran the broadband selector up and down across the radio spectrum in an effort to locate a repeating signal against the warbling background noise of space. He barely noticed that the deck had become colder, that the ceiling lights had shut off; his previous intentions now forgotten, he had neglected to tell the AI that he had changed his mind.

The object had disappeared as quickly as it had appeared, yet he was absolutely certain of what he had seen. It wasn't a hallucination, of that he was positive, and the more he thought about it, the more convinced he became that what he had spotted wasn't a natural object but a spacecraft, briefly glimpsed from some inestimable distance—a thousand kilometers? ten thousand? a million?—as it passed the *Alabama*.

Yet where had it come from? Not from Earth, of that he could only be certain. Who was aboard, and where was it going? His mind conjured countless possibilities as he washed his dinner dishes, then went about preparing an early breakfast he had never expected to eat. Why hadn't it come closer? He considered this as he lay on his bunk, his hands propped behind his head. Perhaps it hadn't seen the *Alabama*. Might he ever see it again? Not likely, he eventually decided . . . yet if there was one, wasn't there always a possibility that there might be others?

He realized that he had to record this incident, so that the rest of the crew would know what he had observed. Yet when he returned to the command deck and began to type a report into the ship's log, he discovered that words failed him. Confronted by a blank flatscreen, everything he wrote seemed hollow and lifeless, nothing evoking the mysterious wonder of what he had observed. It was then that he realized that, during the six long months he had been living within the starship, never once had he ever attempted to write a journal.

Not that there had been much worth recording for posterity: he woke up, he ate, he jogged, he studied, he got drunk, he considered suicide. Yet it seemed as if everything had suddenly changed. Only yesterday he had been ready to walk into the airlock, close his eyes, and jettison himself into the void. Now, he felt as if he had been given a new reason to live . . . but that

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reason only made sense if he left something behind besides an unmade bunk and a half-empty champagne bottle.

He couldn't write on a screen, though, so he searched through the cargo lockers until he found what he needed: a supply of blank ledger books, intended for use by the quartermaster to keep track of expedition supplies, along with a box of pens. Much to his surprise, he also discovered a couple of sketchbooks, some charcoal pencils, and a watercolor paint kit; someone back on Earth apparently had the foresight to splurge a few kilos on rudimentary art supplies.

Gillis carried a ledger and a couple of pens back to the wardroom. Although the game table was ruined, it made a perfect desk once its top was shut. He rearranged the furniture so that the table faced the porthole. For some reason, writing in longhand felt more comfortable; after a couple of false starts, which he impatiently scratched out, he was finally able to put down a more or less descriptive account of what he had seen the night before, followed by a couple of pages of informal conjecture of what it might have been.

When he was done, his back hurt from having bent over the table for so long, and there now was a sore spot between the index and middle fingers of his right hand where he had gripped his pen. Although he had nothing more to say, nonetheless he had the need to say more; putting words to paper had been a release unlike any he had felt before, an experience that had transported him, however temporarily, from this place to somewhere else. His body was tired but his mind was alive; despite his physical exhaustion, he felt a longing for something else to write.

He didn't know it then, but he was beginning to go sane.

As Gillis gradually resumed the daily schedule he had established for himself before the darkness had set in, he struggled to find something to write about. He tried to start a journal, but that was futile and depressing. He squandered a few pages on an autobiography before he realized that writing about his life made him self-conscious; in the end he ripped those pages from the ledger and threw them away. His poetry was ridiculous; he almost reconsidered a trip to the airlock when he re-read the tiresome doggerel he had contrived. In desperation he jotted down a list of things that he missed, only to realize that it was not only trivial but even more embarrassing than his autobiography. That too ended in the wastebin.

For long hours he sat at his makeshift desk, staring through the porthole as he aimlessly doodled, making pictures of the bright star he had seen that eventful night. More than a few times he was tempted to find a bottle of scotch and get drunk, yet the recollection of what he had nearly done to himself kept him away from the liquor. More than anything else, he wanted to write something meaningful, at least to himself if not for anyone else, yet it seemed as if his mind had become a featureless plain. Inspiration eluded him.

Then, early one morning before the lights came on, he abruptly awoke with the fleeting memory of a particularly vivid dream. Most of his dreams tended to be about Earth—memories of places he had been, people whom he had known—yet this one was different; he wasn't in it, nor did it take place anywhere he had ever been.

He couldn't recall any specific details, yet he was left with one clear vision: a young man standing on an alien landscape, gazing up at an azure

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sky dominated by a large ringed planet, watching helplessly as a bright light—Gillis recognized it as the starship he had seen—raced away from him, heading into deep space.

Gillis almost rolled over and went back to sleep, yet he found himself sitting up and reaching for his robe. He took a shower, and as he stood beneath the lukewarm spray, his imagination began to fill the missing pieces. The young man was a prince, a nobleman from some world far from Earth; indeed, Earth's history didn't even belong to the story. His father's kingdom had fallen to a tyrant and he had been forced to flee for his life, taking refuge on a starship bound for another inhabited planet. Yet its crew, fearing the tyrant's wrath, had cast him away, leaving him marooned him upon a habitable moon of an uncharted planet, without any supplies or companionship. . . .

Still absorbed by the story in his mind, Gillis got dressed, then went to the wardroom. He turned on a couple of lights, then he sat down at his desk and picked up his pen. There was no hesitation as he opened the ledger and turned to a fresh page; almost as if in a trance, he began to write.

And he never stopped.

To be sure, there were many times when Gillis laid down his pen. His body had its limitations, and he couldn't remain at his desk indefinitely before hunger or exhaustion overcame him. And there were occasions when he didn't know what to do next; in frustration he would impatiently pace the floor, groping for the next scene, perhaps even the next word.

Yet after a time it seemed as if the prince knew what to do even before he did. As he explored his new world Gillis encountered many creatures—some of whom became friends, some of whom were implacable enemies—and journeyed to places that tested the limits of his ever-expanding imagination. As he did, Gillis—and Prince Rupurt, who subtly become his alter-ego—found himself embarked on an adventure more grand than anything he had ever believed possible.

Gillis changed his routine, fitting everything around the hours he spent at his desk. He rose early and went straight to work; his mind felt sharpest just after he got out of bed, and all he needed was a cup of coffee to help him wake up a little more. Around midday he would prepare a modest lunch, then walk around the ring corridor for exercise; two or three times a week he would patrol the entire ship, making sure that everything was functioning normally. By early afternoon he was back at his desk, picking up where he had left off, impatient to find out what would happen next.

He filled a ledger before he reached the end of his protagonist's first adventure; without hesitation, he opened a fresh book and continued without interruption, and when he wore out his first pen, he discarded it without a second thought. A thick callus developed between the second and third knuckles of his right middle finger, yet he barely noticed. When the second ledger was filled, he placed it on top of the first one at the edge of his desk. He seldom read what he had written except when he needed to recheck the name of a character or the location of a certain place; after a while he learned to keep notes in a separate book so that he wouldn't have to look back at what he had already done.

When evening came he would make dinner, read a little, spend some time gazing out the window. Every now and then he would go down to the command deck to check the nav table. Eventually the *Alabama*'s distance from

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Earth could be measured in parsecs rather then single light-years, yet even this fact had become incidental at best, and in time it became utterly irrelevant.

Gillis kept the chronometers covered; never again did he ever want to know how much time had passed. He stopped wearing shorts and a shirt and settled for merely wearing his robe; sometimes he went through the entire day naked, sitting at his desk without a stitch of clothing. He kept his fingernails and toenails trimmed, and he always paid careful attention to his teeth, yet he gave up cutting his hair and beard. He showered once or twice a week, if that.

When he wasn't writing, he was sketching pictures of the characters he had created, the strange cities and landscapes they visited. By now he had filled four ledgers with the adventures of his prince, yet words alone weren't sufficient to bring life to his imagination. The next time he returned to the cargo module for a new ledger and a handful of pens, he found the watercolor set he had noticed earlier and brought it back to the wardroom.

That evening, he began to paint the walls.

One morning, he rose at his usual time. He took a shower, then he put on his robe—which was now frayed at the cuffs and worn through at the elbows—and made his long journey to the wardroom. Lately it had become more difficult for him to climb up and down ladders; his joints always seemed to ache, and aspirin relieved the pain only temporarily. There had been other changes as well; while making up his bunk a couple of days ago, he had been mildly surprised to find a long grey hair upon his pillow.

As he passed through the ring corridor, he couldn't help but admire his work. The forest mural he had started some time ago was almost complete; it extended halfway from Module C1 to Module C3, and it was quite lovely to gaze upon, although he needed to add a little more detail to the leaves. That might take some doing; he had recently exhausted the watercolors, and since then had resorted to soaking the dyes out of his old clothes.

He had a light breakfast, then he carefully climbed down the ladder to his studio; he had long since ceased to think of it as the wardroom. His ledger lay open on his desk, his pen next to the place where he had left off last night. Rupurt was about to fight a duel with the lord of the southern kingdom, and he was looking forward to seeing how all this would work out.

He farted loudly as he sat down, giving him reason to smile with faint amusement, then he picked up his pen. He read the last paragraph he had composed, crossed out a few words that seemed unnecessary, then raised his eyes to the porthole, giving himself a few moments to compose his thoughts.

A bright star moved against space, one more brilliant than any he had seen in a very long while.

He stared at it for a long while. Then, very slowly, he rose from his desk, his legs trembling beneath his robe. His gaze never left the star as he backed away from the window, taking one small step after another as he moved toward the ladder behind him.

The star had returned. Or perhaps this was another one. Either way, it looked very much like the mysterious thing he had seen once before, a long time ago.

The pen fell from his hand as he bolted for the ladder. Ignoring the arthritic pain shooting through his arms and legs, he scrambled to the top deck of the module, then dashed down the corridor to the hatch leading to

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the hub shaft. This time, he knew what had to be done; get to his old station, transmit a clear vox transmission on all frequencies. . . .

He had climbed nearly halfway down the shaft before he realized that he didn't know exactly what to say. A simple greeting? A message of friendship? Yes, that might do . . . but how would he identify himself?

In that moment, he realized that he couldn't remember his name.

Stunned by this revelation, he clung to the ladder. His name. Surely he could recall his own name. . . .

Gillis. Of course. He was Gillis. Gillis, Leslie. Lieutenant Commander Leslie Gillis. Chief communications officer of . . . yes, right . . . the URSS *Alabama*. He smiled, climbed down another rung. It had been so long since he had heard anyone say his name aloud, he probably couldn't even speak it himself. . . .

Couldn't he?

Gillis opened his mouth, urged himself to say something. Nothing emerged from his throat save for a dry croak.

No. He could still speak; he was simply out of practice. All he had to do was get to his station. If he could remember the correct commands, he might still be able to send a signal to Prince Rupurt's ship before it passed beyond range. He just needed to . . .

His left foot missed the next rung on the ladder. Thrown off-balance, he glanced down to see what he had done wrong . . . then his right hand slipped off the ladder. Suddenly he found himself falling backward, his arms and legs flailing helplessly. Down, down, down. . . .

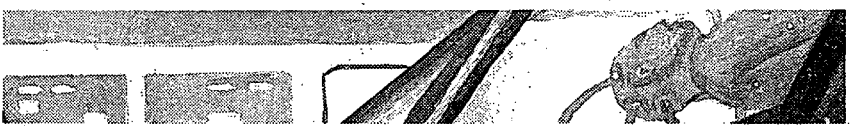
"Oh, no," he said softly.

An instant later he hit the bottom of the shaft. There was a brief flash of pain as his neck snapped, then blackness rushed in upon him and it was all over.

A few hours later, one of the 'bots found Gillis's body. It prodded him several times, confirming that the cold organic form lying on the floor of Deck H5 was indeed lifeless, then it relayed a query to the AI. The molecular intelligence carefully considered the situation for a few fractions of a second, then it instructed the spider to jettison the corpse. This was done within the next two minutes; ejected from the starship, Gillis spun away into the void, another small piece of debris lost between the stars.

The AI determined that it was no longer necessary for the crew compartments to remain habitable, so it returned the thermostat setting to 50 degrees. A 'bot moved through the ship, cleaning up after Gillis. It left untouched the thirteen ledgers he had completed, along with the fourteenth that lay open upon his desk. There was nothing that could be done about the paintings on the walls of Module C7 and the ring access corridor, so they were left alone. Once the 'bot completed its chores, the AI closed the shutters of the windows Gillis had left open, then methodically turned off all the lights, one by one.

The date was February 25, 2102, GMT. The rest of the flight went smoothly, without further incident.❍



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THE RELUCTANT ASTRONAUT

What mystery could velvet space hold
that I cannot find in your elusive smile,
what discoveries lie in flickering points of light
that do not also live in your dancing eyes,

How can the vacuum of space draw breath from me faster
than the promise of the touch of your hungry lips,
the barren walls of a spaceship bring less fear
than the scorching torrent of your anger,

Why be pressed against a launch chair by four gee
when I can writhe beneath your fierce desire,
the light of Earth from afar does not compare to
the radiance of your face in the morning,

I will not go into the open universe
when I need to linger in your embrace,
my soul fed by the scent of your body
the expanse of your sweet love.

—Linda Addison

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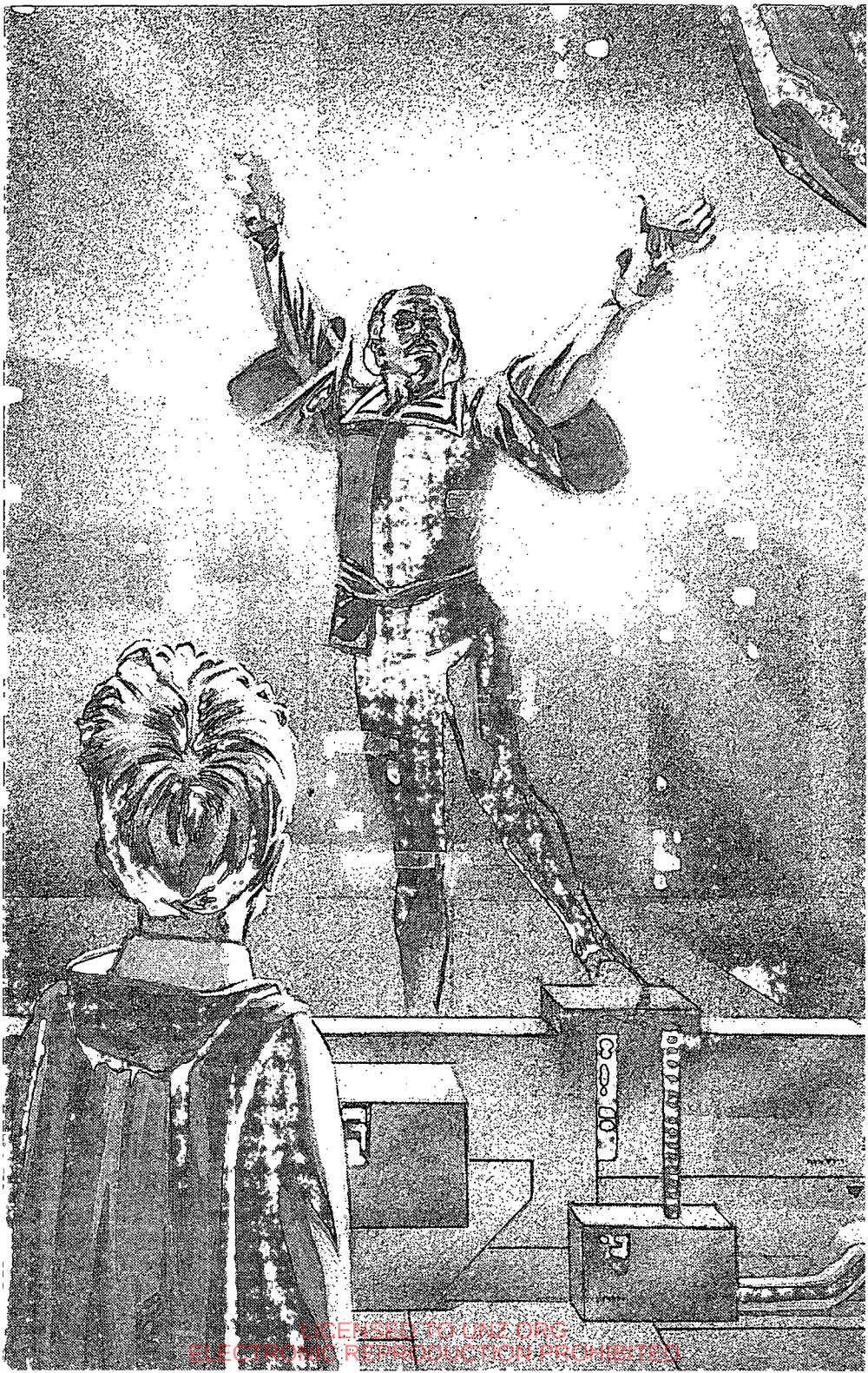

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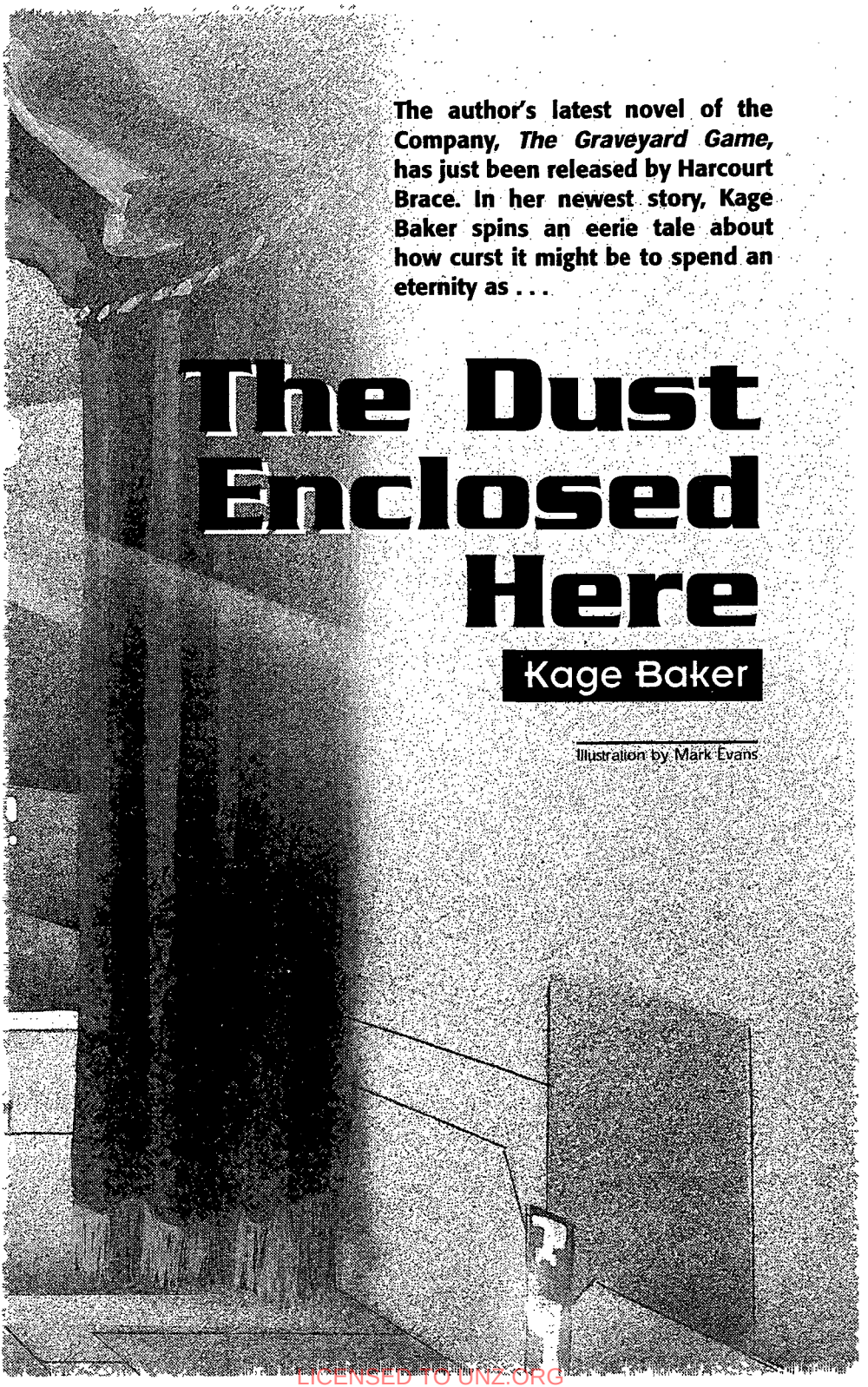

The author's latest novel of the Company, *The Graveyard Game*, has just been released by Harcourt Brace. In her newest story, Kage Baker spins an eerie tale about how curst it might be to spend an eternity as . . .

The Dust Enclosed Here

Kage Baker

Illustration by Mark Evans

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"He never wore a red doublet in his life!"

Susanna had sounded outraged. Hastening to smooth her anger, the stranger's voice had followed: "An you wish it painted, good lady, 't will look best in red. Consider! 'Tis not the man you dress, but the monument for Posterity. And, Mistress Hall, Preeves and Sons have plied our trade this many a year and we know what looks well in a memorial. Think of the dark church, ay, and the old wood, and this splendid funerary bust gleaming from the shadows in—gray? No, no, Mistress, it must be a goodly scarlet, granting your dear father a splendor like the setting sun!"

Will's sun was setting. His son down below the horizon and he'd follow soon enough himself. He had wadded the sheet between his fingers irritably, wishing they'd go have their hissed argument elsewhere. No, no peace yet; Susanna had drawn back the curtain, letting in the blinding light while a shabby fellow in a puke-colored coat peered at him, respectful as though he were already dead, and sketched in a book the rough cartoon to impose on a marble bust blank.

"Christ Jesu," Will had muttered, closing his eyes. When he'd opened his eyes again, preparing to give them his best offended glare, he was surprised to discover they were gone and it was night. Nothing but low coals to light the room, with a blue flame crawling on them. And then the shadow had loomed against the light, and he'd turned his head expecting it was John—

That was the last memory! The strange doctor who'd come for his soul, or at least it had seemed so. The stranger had bent swiftly, thrusting something cold into his face. He'd felt a sharp pain in his nose and then a tearing between his eyes, sparks of fire, fathomless darkness . . .

Will put his nervous hand up now to stroke the bridge of his nose, imagining he felt sympathetic pain. There was no real pain, he knew. No real hand or nose, either, but if he thought about that for long he'd panic again. Mastering himself, he paced the little tiring-room (or what he pretended was his tiring-room) and waited for his cue.

Here it came, now, the sudden green orb in his vision. He felt the pull and was summoned like the ghost he was, through the insubstantial curtain into the light, where swirling dust motes coalesced into his hologrammatic form.

". . . so give a big welcome to Mr. William Shakespeare!" cried Caitlin gamely, indicating Will with an outflung hand as she stepped aside for him. She wore an antique costume, the sort of gown his grandmothers might have worn. Three people, the whole of his audience, applauded with something less than enthusiasm. He gritted his teeth and smiled brilliantly, bowed grandly with flourishes, wondering what he'd ever done to be consigned to this particular Hell.

"God give ye all good day, good ladies, good gentleman!" he cried.

The lumpen spectators regarded him.

"Doth thou really be-eth Shakespeareth?" demanded the man, grinning, in the flat Lancashireish accent Will had come to understand was *American.*

"As nearly he as Cybertechnology may revive and represent, good sir!" Will told him, and Caitlin made a face, her usual signal meaning: Keep it Simple for the Groundlings. He nodded and went on:

"I am, sir, an insubstantial hologram. Yet my form is drawn in forensic reconstruction from my mortal corpse exact, to show how I was when I lived. Yea, and I have been programmed with quotes from my works for your en-

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tertainment, and my personality hath been extrapolated from the best conjecture of scholars."

Though he suspected that last was a flat lie; it seemed to him that his owners (gentlemen of a company calling itself Jupiter Cyberceuticals) must somehow have captured his memories, if not his soul, in that last minute of his life, and held them prisoner now in this wooden O. However, he said what they had programmed him to say.

"So do you, um, find it really strange being here in the Future?" asked one of the women. She spoke politely enough, but it was a question he'd heard at nearly every performance since his revival. He kept the smile in place and replied:

"Ay, indeed, madam, most strange. When I do hear that Humankind hath nowadays built cities on the Moon, nay, even on Mars, truly I think this is an age of wonders indeed." The programming that he wore like chains prompted him to go on and make certain low jokes about how he wished his era had had a cure for baldness, but he exerted his will and refused. Caitlin wrung her hands.

"What do you think of your Prince Hank?" inquired the other woman, smirking archly, and Will accessed the data on the latest juicy scandal among the Royals. He smirked right back at her and stroked his beard.

"Well, truly, good lady, to paraphrase mine own First Part of Henry the Fourth: right sadly must our poor Queen see riot and dishonor stain the brow of her young Harry!"

They giggled in appreciation. Encouraged, he went on:

"Belike he doth but imitate the sun, who doth permit the base contagious clouds to smother up his beauty from the world, that, when he please again to be himself, being wanted, he may be more wondered at by breaking through the foul and ugly mists—"

No; he'd lost them. His sensors noted their complete incomprehension, though they were smiling and applauding again. He just smiled back and bowed, wishing he had a set of juggler's clubs or a performing dog.

"I thank ye! I humbly thank ye. What would ye, now, good ladies? What would you, now, sir?"

They blinked, their smiles fading.

"What about a sonnet?" he suggested in desperation.

"Okay," agreed the man.

He was programmed to give them the one catalogued as the Eighteenth, and for once he didn't feel like substituting another.

"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" he declaimed, "Thou art more lovely and more temperate . . ." He gave the rest in a performance so widely gestured and so antic even Will Kempe would have winced at it for being over the top, but it held their attention at least.

"That was neat," volunteered the man, when he had done.

"Many thanks. That sonnet, with selected others, is available in the Gifte Shoppe off the lobby, in both ring holo and standard format," he informed them. Caitlin nodded approvingly. The commercials must not be omitted, and that was one of the few things on which he agreed with his owners.

"Does the Gifte Shoppe sell Fruit Chew bars too?" inquired one of the ladies.

"Yea, madam, it doth," he told her, and she turned to her companions.

"I'm starving. Do you want to. . . ?"

"Yeah," the others chorused, nodding, and they turned away and made for

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the exit. Courtesy wasn't entirely dead in this latest age, however; at the door the man turned back and waved.

"Thanks, and—um . . . Goodbyeth thee!"

Will smiled and waved back. "Now God blight thy knave's stones with poxy sores, most noble sir," he murmured sotto voce, noting with relief that it was six o'clock. The Southwark Museum was about to close for the day.

"Our revels now are ended!" he shouted, as the big clock struck across the river.

"Mr. Shakespeare," said Caitlin hesitantly, "You're supposed to follow the script. You know they really do want you to make those jokes about your hair. People like to laugh."

"Then let 'em drag Dicky Tarleton from his grave, and set him in this bear pit," snarled Will. "There was a man of elegant jest, God He knows. Or let in a little mongrel dog to piss my leg, what sayest thou? They'll laugh right heartily then."

"We don't have dogs any more," Caitlin explained. "Not since—"

"Since Beast Liberation, ay, I know it well. Nor canst thou give them Jack Falstaff for merriment, since he is banished, with all the other children of mine invention." Will collapsed into a sitting position on the stage, staring up at the empty galleries of the Globe Restored.

"I'm really sorry about that, Mr. Shakespeare, but I explained to you about the List," said Caitlin, referring to the database of proscribed and immoral literature published annually by the Tri-Worlds Council for Integrity.

"Even so you did," Will admitted. "And rather I had rotted in the earth this many a year than fret away eternity in such a dull, spiteful, and Puritan age. What though my plays won't please? I take no censorship ill; there was ever a Master of the Revels spying over my shoulder lest I write an offense. But if they would let me give them a new piece, why, then! There's fine dramatic matter in these new times. That men might seek their fortunes not in mere Virginia colonies, but on Mars—God's bones, what a wonder! Or a play of the Mountains of the Moon, what say you?" He swung his sharp stare down to her eyes.

"I wish you could," said Caitlin miserably, looking away from his gaze. She had gotten this job in the first place because she had a degree in history and longed, with all her unwise heart, to have been born in the romantic past. "I don't make the policy, Mr. Shakespeare. I'm sorry all your plays were condemned. If it wasn't for the tourist income the borough council wouldn't even let you do your songs and sonnets."

"'The Revenge of Kate,'" Will said slyly, framing a playbill in the air with his hands. "Wherein Petruchio himself is tamed, how like you that? That'll please, surely, and how if there were a mild Jew and a meek harmless Moor to boot? Nor no lusts nor bawdiness, nor any cakes nor ale, nor battles, and they shall ride no horses, out of melting compassion for the poor jades. Nay, more! There shall be a part set to be signed in dumb-show for the, what's the new word? Ay, the hearing-impaired!"

"I wish you could," Caitlin repeated, and he saw that she was near tears, and sighed.

"Go thy ways, girl," he said. "Grant me oblivion."

He stuck out his arms theatrically, as though being pinioned to a rack, and held the pose as she flicked the switch that shut him off for the night. Without illumination the dust motes vanished, settled.

* * *

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So accustomed had he grown to this routine, over the five years he had been an exhibit in the museum, that he nearly died a second time when he found himself unexpectedly *on* in the middle of the night. He leaped to his feet and stared around him in the dark.

"How now?" he stammered. "What, ho! Who's about?"

But there was no sound. The glowing clock told him it was midnight, and he felt a moment's uneasiness until the absurdity of the scene occurred to him: insubstantial ghost frightened of the witching hour! Here came the distant bell, the little tune that preceded long-tolling twelve. He heard it out, pacing the stage.

"I am thy father's spirit," he intoned, and then dropped his voice an octave. "*I* am thy father's spirit, ay, better,

Doomed for a certain term to walk the night
And for the day confined to fast in fires,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away. . ."

He paused at the edge of the stage. Tentatively he extended a foot beyond the light, out of the range of the holoprojector's bright beam. His foot vanished. This was startling, but there was no pain; and after drawing his foot back and seeing it reappear unaltered, he tried with his hand. It vanished too, and came back obligingly when he withdrew it.

"Now, by God's will . . ." he said. He turned his face up toward the painted Heavens. "Almighty Father, can I escape this vile purgatory? Are mine own sins burnt and purged away? Oh, let it be so!"

Backing up for a running start, he sprinted forward and hurtled hopeful into the darkness. He landed with a crash in the middle of the groundling area and lay there a moment, cursing imaginatively.

Rising, he put up his hands to dust himself off and realized that he couldn't see them, though he was still palpable. He cast a baleful stare at the cone of light on the stage, empty now but for a few motes of glittering dust.

"That's well," he said sarcastically. "First my mortal substance and now my form. Am I to be no more than memory?"

Nobody answered him. He climbed up on stage again and found that his image returned when he stood there. He amused himself for a while making bits of his body disappear. It occurred to him he might explore the Southwark Museum and this cheered him considerably until he found that, insubstantial or not, he was unable to leave the perimeter of the Globe Restored; whereat he said something to which Sir Edmund Tilney would certainly have objected.

All the rest of that night he prowled the silent galleries, a shadow among shadows, raging at his immortality.

Over the next six months the phenomenon occurred, with increasing frequency: sudden and unbidden consciousness when he had been manifestly shut off, and with it a gradual widening of his ability to range. He found himself able, in time, to venture out to the Gifte Shoppe and Snack Bar areas if he remained close to the wall through which ran the power and communications cables. There was nothing especially to interest him out there, since he was incapable of eating and the Gifte Shoppe had no writing materials, nor was he substantial enough to have stolen any had there been. Still, it was a little freedom.

* * *

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The day things truly changed for him began very badly indeed.

It was a day of the sort of weather the English plod through and ignore, but all others wisely shun, remaining in their hotels. Consequently no tourist vans pulled up before the Southwark Museum, and consequently Mr. Pressboard had the whole of the Globe Restored to himself when he arrived.

"Oh, dear," said Caitlin when she saw him coming, and flipped the switch that summoned Will. He materialized, started through the curtain and stopped in horror at the sight of Mr. Pressboard setting up his folding stool before the stage, as rain bounced and plinked on the forcefield above the thatching.

"Well, I see our most regular visitor is back again!" cried Caitlin in a bright false voice. "Welcome to the Globe Restored! We hope you'll enjoy yet another visit with the world-famous writer, Mr. William Shakespeare!"

"Except that he wasn't a writer," grunted Mr. Pressboard. "He was a butcher's boy."

Will's lip curled and Caitlin's laugh dopplered after her as she made for the exit.

"Well, you two will just have to work that out!" she said, giving Will a look of guilty apology. "I hope you'll just excuse me—I have to see about something."

"Oh, faithless," Will hissed after her, before dragging a smile on his face for Mr. Pressboard.

Mr. Pressboard was a retired person who believed, unshakably, that all of Will's stuff had really been written by the Earl of Oxford. It was more than an article of faith for him; it was a cause. He wore, in the public streets, a sweatshirt and cap that proclaimed it. Vain for Will to deny the mysterious coded acrostic clues that were supposed to be hidden in the poems. Vain for him to insist, ever so politely, that there had been no vast and ridiculous conspiracy to conceal their true authorship. Mr. Pressboard had no life, and consequently all the tedious time in the world to park himself in front of the stage and argue his case.

Today he was intent on demonstrating how no man with Will's paltry education could ever have written such masterful lines as, for example, "The gaudy, blabbing and remorseful day/ Is crept into the bosom of the sea" and went on some two hours on this theme without pausing once. Will was pacing the stage repeating silently "Be courteous; he paid at the door" over and over, when a small boy wandered into the Globe.

He wore a yellow rain slicker and rubbers, and his dun-fair hair was tousled from having been under the slicker's hood. From the Snack Bar he had obtained a Fruit Chew and stood now nibbling the granola off its surface as he watched Mr. Pressboard talk and talk and talk, and Will interject occasional "Hem" and "Er" sounds.

After fifteen minutes the boy grew bored with this and started wandering around, up into the galleries and climbing on the balustrades. He leaned far over them to peer at the paintings of Apollo and Mercury. When he had tired of that he descended to the groundling level and inspected the trompe l'oeil stonework. He craned his head back to study the painted Heavens and looked longingly at the dummy cannon. Finally he approached Mr. Pressboard and, extending an index finger, poked him in the arm.

"Excuse me," he said. "Can it be my turn now?"

"Even if Sir Philip Sidney did—what?" Mr. Pressboard started and turned

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to stare at him. The boy stared back. His eyes were wide, and a very pale blue.

"Can it be my turn to talk to Mr. Shakespeare now?" the boy reiterated.

"Forsooth, good Master Pressboard, we must suffer young scholars to have their day, must we not?" Shakespeare exclaimed gleefully. Mr. Pressboard remained planted where he was, however, and frowned at the boy.

"I'm discussing something important, young man. Go away."

The boy backed off a pace, then dug in his heels. His pale stare became cold.

"But other people are supposed to get turns too, you know," he said, not taking his eyes from Mr. Pressboard's eyes.

Abruptly: "Okay," said Mr. Pressboard, with an odd scared expression on his face. He got up, grabbed his folding stool and hurried for the exit. Will felt like turning a cartwheel. The boy looked up at him.

"He was really boring you, huh?" he said.

"To hot salt tears, lad," Will told him, dropping down to sit crosslegged on the edge of the stage. "God keep thee and bless thee. What's thy name?"

"You don't remember?" The boy looked disappointed. "It's Alec. I came here when I was five. Remember?"

"I see many, many folk, Alec, every day," Will explained. "Wherefore I pray you excuse me."

The boy nodded.

"That's all right. There was a lot of kids that day. You sang me that song about the wind and rain and hay hoes."

"Ah! To be sure." Sweet Christ, someone who'd actually listened to him! Will smiled at the boy. "Dost thou like the Southwark Museum, Alec?"

"It's okay," said Alec. "Derek and Lulu wanted to be alone in the car so they gave me my credit disc and said I could buy anything I wanted in the Gifty Shoppy, as long as I stayed in here until it was lunchtime. I think they're having sex actually."

"Forsooth?" Will attempted, successfully, to keep a straight face. "And what hast thou bought in the Gifte Shoppe, lad?"

"Nothing much," Alec said. "It's all shirts and holocards and tea mugs with this place on them. I like things with ships on them. But I wanted to see how you were so I came in here. How are you doing? You were sad when I saw you before. Are you happier now?"

Will opened his mouth to sing the praises of this wonderful modern age when there were cities on the Moon and cures for baldness, but what he said was:

"No, boy. I am the saddest wretch that liveth, in this most unnatural life of mine."

"Oh. I'm sorry," Alec replied, coming close to lean on the stage. "What's wrong?"

"I am a slave here, lad," Will replied.

"What's a slave?"

"A living soul kept as property by others, to labor for them eternally."

"But I thought you were dead a long time ago," said Alec.

"And yet I speak and reason, imprisoned within this cloven pine." Will stared into the boy's eyes, raised his clenched fists to show the shackles on his imagination. "I live again, Alec, how I know not, and yet I cannot have the thing I need to live!"

"What's that?" Alec wanted to know.

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"Dost thou know what a poet is, lad?"

"That's what you are," said Alec, "It means you make stories to watch. I think. Doesn't it?"

"Ay, lad, I made stories to watch. Out of earth and heaven I pulled the unknown, gave it form and made it speak, and men filled this Globe and marveled at it! And paid good money to marvel, too, mind, t'was a profitable endeavor. But my masters will have me make no shows now. I am the show, and strut here meaningless afore barren spectators." Will sagged forward as though pulled by the weight of his unseen chains.

"You mean you want to make more stories and they won't let you?" Alec looked outraged.

"Even so, lad."

"That's mean! You can't even make 'em in Cyberspace?"

"Cyber *Space?*" Will lifted his head and stared at the boy. "A space Cybertechnological, you mean? Or what do you mean?"

"It's like—look. You're right here, but you're not really here," said Alec, pointing to him. "Where you really are is in the system. Where's your controls?"

"I know not—" Will held his hands wide, signifying bewilderment. Alec, pink with anger, was stamping along the front of the stage searching for something. At last he climbed up on the stage, ignoring the signs that forbade him doing so, and spotting the trap door that had once let ghosts rise out of the depths he fell to his knees beside it. Will scrambled to his feet and followed, looking down.

"I bet they're in here," said Alec. He reached into his coat and, looking around furtively, drew out a small case. It looked quite a bit like a thief's set of picklocks that Will had once seen in his less prosperous days. Alec noticed his astounded stare.

"Just my tools," he said in a small voice. "You won't tell?"

"Nay, boy, not I!" Will vowed. He watched as Alec lifted out the trap to reveal, not the hollow dark he had thought was below, but a sort of shallow cavity full of winking lights and bright buttons. He was so surprised he got down on hands and knees beside Alec to look at it closely.

"God's bleeding wounds!"

"I have to be fast," Alec said, and manipulating some of the things in amid the lights he glanced up toward the ceiling. "'Cos I'm not really supposed to do this, not to other people's machines anyway. Okay: now the guard cameras in here think I'm still standing down there talking to you. Sneaky, huh?" He grinned at Will.

"But what is this?" Will asked, pointing at the box of lights.

"This is—er—where you really are," said Alec, hesitantly, as though he thought it might hurt Will's feelings. "But you can pretend it's jewels we're going to steal or something," he added, talking out of the side of his mouth like a petty crook. "Piece of cake, see?"

Will just watched as Alec took out his tools and did things to the buttons and lights. Red letters flashed in Will's peripheral vision and he put up his hand in an impatient gesture, as though they were flies he might wave off, before the import of the words sank in on him.

SUMMON HUMAN ASSISTANCE! MEDICAL EMERGENCY!

The sensors he used to monitor his audience began to chatter at him in a panicky way, informing him that they detected violent seizure activity in Alec's brain. Will almost shouted for Caitlin, but paused. He had seen folk

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afflicted with the falling sickness, and Alec did not appear to be having any manner of fit. The boy's eyes were alert and focused, his hands steady, and he worked swiftly and without the least hesitation as the bright storm raged within his skull.

Will shrugged and dismissed the sensors' warning. He had long since observed that even in this fabulous Future World, things occasionally malfunctioned. Especially marvels Cybertechnological.

Presently Alec drew out something between tweezers. It looked like a tiny word in an unknown language, written in pure light.

"And that's it," he said thoughtfully, turning it this way and that. "Funny."

"What is it, in God's name?"

"It's your program," Alec replied. "You've got lots and lots in here, but they didn't give you very much to do. There's the new stuff you wrote yourself, that little winji bit there. Were you trying to bypass the holoemitter system?"

"I know not—" said Will, and then remembered his inexplicable nocturnal self-awareness. Had that been his own doing, by some means he couldn't name? Had his misery been enough to force his prison walls outward?

"It almost looks like you're a memory file from someplace else." The boy seemed puzzled. "This is a whole bunch of data. You could have a lot more functions, you know. You want to?"

Will had no idea what he meant, but just the thought of having any kind of choice made him feel like dancing.

"Ay, forsooth!"

"Okay," said Alec, and set the bright word back and made some alteration. What happened next even Will could never find words to describe adequately. Was there a silent sound? An invisible flash of light? A torrent of mathematical language forced itself into his head, and with it came strange comprehension. He rose on his knees, clutching his temples and gasping, while the boy closed up the trap and put away the little tools.

"So now," said Alec, "it'll be lots nicer. You can make stuff in here."

"Stuff?" said Will, getting unsteadily to his feet. "What stuff, lad?"

"Whatever you want there to be," said Alec. He shrugged. "You know. You just write what you want."

What he meant by *write* had nothing to do with quills and parchment, but it didn't matter. Will was at last beginning to get a sense of the laws of this universe.

"Maybe write some chairs or something so you can sit down, yeah?" Alec gestured at the bare stage.

"Or cloud-capp'd towers," said Will, staring around. "Or gorgeous palaces!"

"Yeah." Alec nodded. Will looked hard at him.

"How canst thou do these things, child? What art thou?"

"Different," said Alec, squirming.

Will raised an eyebrow, remembering the abnormal cerebral activity his sensors had picked up. Shrewd as he was, he was unable to guess the whole truth; for his owners at Jupiter Cyberceuticals had not included any information on *genetic engineering* in his programming. After all, it was illegal to make an enhanced human being. Even a small one . . . because who knew what such a creature might do if it was allowed to grow up? It would be as unpredictable as—for example—an Artificial Intelligence built on a human memory file, which was an equally illegal creature.

But Jupiter Cyberceuticals did a lot of illegal things.

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"Thou art some prodigy, with powers," speculated Will.

"Don't tell on me! I'd get in trouble if anybody found out." Alec looked pleadingly up at Will. "Nobody's supposed to be different, you see?"

"I know it well, ay," Will told him with feeling.

Alec started as the clock began to strike across the river. "Oh! I have to go now. It was really nice seeing you again, Mr. Shakespeare." He jumped down from the stage and ran for the exit, pausing long enough to turn and wave. "I hope that works. Byebye!"

He fled past Caitlin, who looked down at him in surprise as she came in.

"You're not allowed to run in here!" she called after him, and turned to Will. "Look, I'm awfully sorry about Mr. Pressboard. Who was that?"

"Verily one of the young-ey'd cherubins," said Will, throwing his deepest bow. He grinned like a fox.

Six hours sped by like so many elephantine years, leaden, dull, and ponderous, but Will could wait. He bore gracefully with a chartered busload of Scots who found fault with every aspect of *Macbeth,* and wanted an apology; he capered for an infant care class who had no idea who he was, and sang them his song about the wind and the rain. When the clock struck Six at last he bid Caitlin a fond adieu. As she shut him off for the day, she observed to herself that he seemed much less moody than usual, though there was a disconcerting glitter in his eyes as he vanished from her sight.

Somehow present and conscious still, he watched her departure and waited. The lights were extinguished. The security system activated. Dark roaring rain and night closed over old London. He reached out a sinuous impalpable thread of his will—Ay! That was it, he was all Will now, and most himself being nothing but will!— to the surveillance cameras, bidding them see only shadows.

Then he willed the holoemitter on and gave it wider range than it had previously, and his Globe was full of light, like a bright craft venturing on the night ocean. Briefly he considered summoning a pen and inkhorn, but realized they were unnecessary now.

"I have a muse of fire!" Will cried, and wrote his will in code that blazed like lightning, sparkled like etched crystal. From the brightest heaven of invention he ordered a backdrop of lunar cities drawn in silverpoint, painted in ivory and gold and cloudy blue, outlandish spires and towers flying fluttering pennons against the eternal stars.

With clean hands he willed the light, and out of the spinning dust a simulacrum of Richard Burbage formed. He stood before Will in his prime, not yet run to fat, and there too were Ned Alleyn and Kempe and Armin, Heminges and Condell, Lowin and Crosse and Phillips with the rest. Attending on his will, they were in makeup and in costumes that fit too, coeval, awake, sober and on their marks, every man jack of 'em.

They looked around uncertainly.

"Why, Will, what's toward?" inquired Kempe, meek as you please.

"A rehearsal!" thundered Will. "And I will give thee thy lines extempore. The Most Fantastical Comedy of Man On the Moon, my masters!" O

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PAST IMPERFECT

Robert Reed

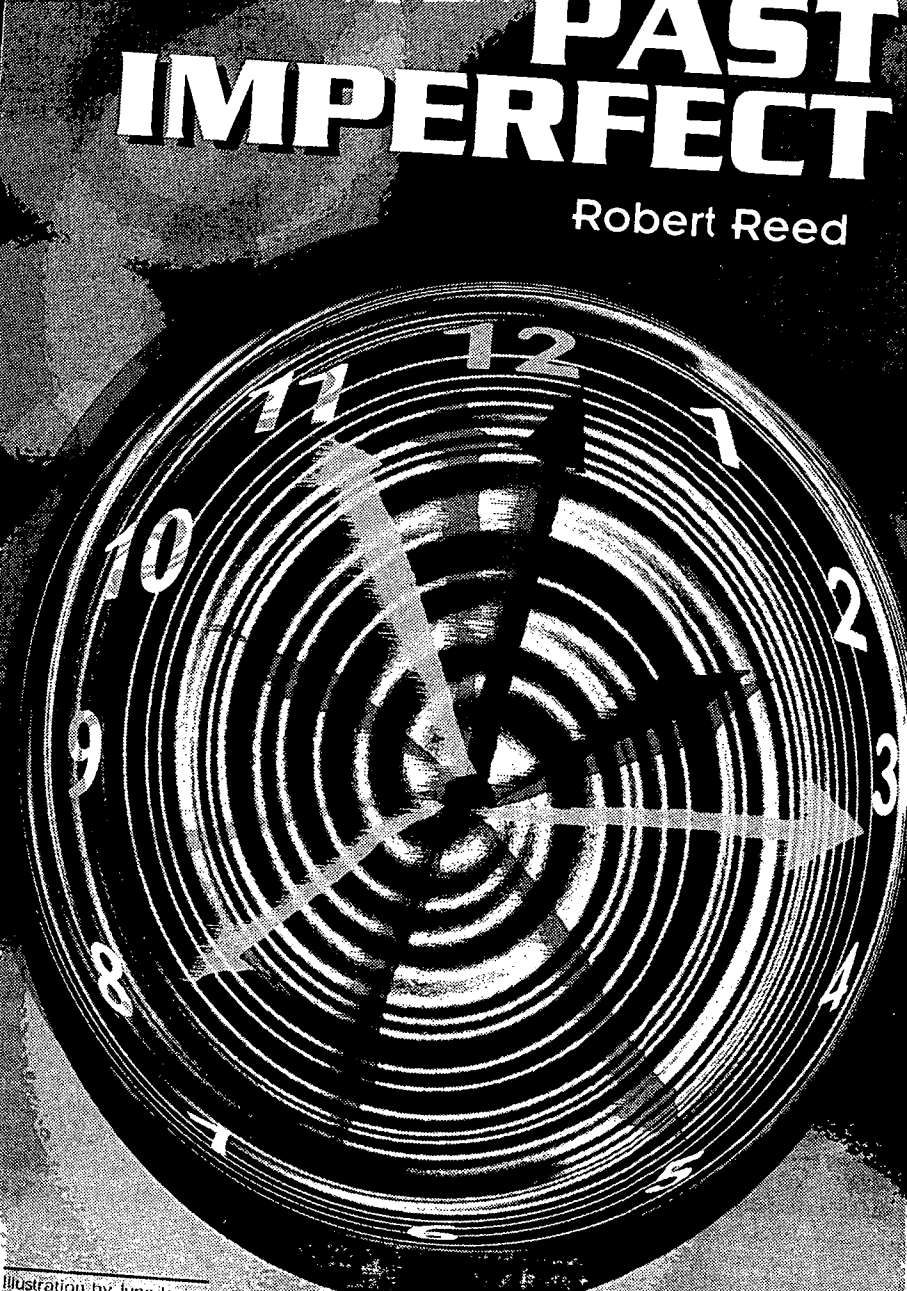

Illustration by June Levine

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Robert Reed tells us that his [illegible]
those of the protagonist of 'Past Imperfect.' If the future is obscure and undefined, why not the past too? Of course, I have no skills with mathematics, high physics, or the true nature of time. And equally of course, I'm a writer. I make up neat things and play with them."

He dreams about his wife again. She's alive again, if only barely. This time it seems to be her liver that's killing her, judging by the yellow in her thin face and her starving little hands. But he is too embarrassed by his own ignorance to ask for a diagnosis. Whatever the disease, it looks and sounds miserable. Her voice is soft and wet and leaking gibberish as she stares up at the ceiling, paying no attention to him. He feels forgotten. He feels wasted and foolish, even when he leans across the hospital bed and kisses his dead wife on the end of her little yellow nose.

A hand covers his mouth.

In his dream, the hand belongs to his wife, and he is astonished by its warmth and its obvious strength. He takes hope from that hand. She isn't as sick as she pretends to be, the illness is a lie, and the buoyancy of that unexpected hope causes him to open his eyes, the dream dissolving, but a strong young hand still firmly clamped across his mouth.

A voice says, "Nothing. Not a word."

It's a woman's voice. Young, and intimately close.

"Understand?" she asks. Then she tells him, "If you understand, nod."

He nods.

"Because I have a gun," she adds with a casual menace. "How about you, old man? Do you have any sort of weapon?"

He shakes his head.

"Okay," she says. "I'm taking back my hand. Scream and you won't have any future. Do you understand that?"

He starts to nod, then the hand has gone. "Yes," he whispers.

Then, he softly coughs.

The woman is tall when she stands beside his bed, and she's silhouetted by the greenish light slipping through the blinds. She wears normal clothes. Somehow that surprises him. In the holos, burglars push themselves into tight-fitting bodysuits that make them sleek and hard to see inside darkened buildings and homes. But no, her outfit seems perfectly ordinary. Loose slacks and some kind of blouse.

What little he can see of her face tells him that she is white and young. Nineteen, or twenty-two, or maybe thirty. Lately, any woman under thirty looks like a girl to him. And it's a relief that the thief is a woman. But that's another false comfort. Anymore, the gender of your enemy doesn't change the outcome much one way or the other.

"What do you want?" he whispers.

"It depends," she replies. "What can you give me?"

"Money," he blurts.

"Like cash?"

"Yes."

"Lots of cash?"

Honesty moves him to admit, "No." Then he gulps and says, "I have a little money. In my wallet."

"Not now, you don't." The hand that held his mouth now lifts his wallet

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high, letting it fall open, every plastic sleeve empty of its cares. "So where's your real money? Tell me."

"I don't have more," he confesses.

"Not here?"

"No."

"For future reference," she growls, "don't get me wet for things you can't deliver."

The way she says it—"Don't get me wet"—leaves him terrified. Frantic. At last, he realizes just how terrible his circumstances are. This is awful. Dangerous, and awful. And he isn't even certain what scares him worse: His death, or the horrific things that she might do to him on his way to death.

"You've got money somewhere," she tells him. "It takes seven digits to live in enclaves like this. At least seven."

He can't speak. He's absolutely paralyzed.

"And all your shit's new." The thief steps to the end of the bed, a penlight coming on with a *click,* the beam changing from laser-narrow to a wide setting that bathes the furnishings and holo projector with a soft blue light. "That's one of the new models," she remarks. "Makes it seem as if you're really there, doesn't it?"

"Take it," he grunts.

"How strong do I look?" she replies with a snort. "I'm not strolling out with a hundred pounds on my back, and cords dragging."

He remembers to breathe.

With a dancer's deftness, she moves to his new dresser, pointing the now-narrow beam into an opened cupboard. Inside the cupboard is a titanium box. "This is locked," she complains. "What is it? A jewelry box?"

A sinking sensation takes hold of him.

"Where's the key?" she asks.

Suddenly he feels a little sleepy. His eyes close, and, for that instant, he can almost imagine falling back into his awful dreams.

"The key," she repeats.

"Don't," he squeaks.

She watches him, always. Everything else deserves nothing more than a glance. She glances at the locked box and at the nightstand, probably wondering if the key is hiding in the drawer. Then some deep calculation makes her change tactics. She pulls a small handgun from a baggy pocket on her left hip, passing it to her right hand and leveling it at his face, once again saying, "The key."

"They're my wife's jewels," he mutters.

She says, "You'll just buy her new ones."

"She's dead."

"Well," the girl says instantly. "Then it's not as if anybody's taking them *from* anybody. Is it?"

He says nothing.

"Tell me where the key is."

He finds just enough courage to sit up. The girl's face is halfway visible in the reflected glare of the penlight. She looks pretty, in a hardened fashion. Her appearance gives him an irrational hope. Quietly, but with a newfound resolve, he says, "You don't want to hurt me."

She says nothing.

"Kill me," he tells her, "and your future is set. Is decided. And it's not a future that you'd like, young lady."

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Perhaps she's surprised by his menacing tone. More likely, she's just wondering where an old man would keep an important key—a key that he wouldn't want to misplace.

He says, "I'm famous."

Which makes her snort in disgust. For a moment, she shines the light into his eyes, forcing him to blink and throw a hand over his face. Then she says, "Okay," with a low snort. "If you're famous, why don't I know you?"

"I changed my face recently."

People did that. More often all the time, they tried to escape their past.

"You look about sixty," she observes. "How old are you?"

"Sixty-three."

"If you're going to change your looks, why not go younger?" That's what she finds improbable. Not that he has a new face, but that he picked *this* face.

"I want to look my age," he replies with a prickly vanity.

She considers his answer, then says, "So all right. Who exactly *are* you?"

He says the name.

She doesn't seem to hear him. Her interest shifts to a security chopper passing outside, its brilliant white beam sweeping in purely random patterns. She steps to the window and peeks through the blinds, and when the chopper has passed, she continues looking outside, repeating the name. "Morris Lanes," she says, a sturdy doubt bleeding into an odd, almost buoyant hopefulness. "Is that who you think you are?"

"I was him. Yes."

"I thought he was . . . well, I don't know where he is. . . ."

"Morris Lanes vanished from public life last year," he explains. "After the death of his wife, he disappeared completely."

"Yeah, that's ringing a bell. A big bell."

Again, he promises, "If you hurt me, everyone will know it. This won't be an ordinary crime. The police won't stop investigating until you're found, and you'll be tried and convicted under the celebrity-protection laws—"

"Morris," she interrupts.

"What?"

"Are you *really?*"

"I was. But not anymore."

"The most famous scientist since . . . who. . . ?" She finds something delicious about the possibility. Then to make the situation even more unbearable, she lowers her weapon and points her penlight into his blinking eyes, her voice suddenly nervous as she admits to him, "You have no idea . . . what kind of hero you are to me. . . !"

Among theoretical physicists, Morris Lanes was a late bloomer. He was already past thirty when he began his important work, and two years later, his inventive period had run its course. Despite limitations as a mathematician, Morris managed to invent new tools for looking at the universe. He was fascinated by the principles masquerading as cause-and-effect. Lanes' First Theory was a reasonable and useful redecanting of every Chaos Theory. It maintained that the future was largely undecided. The grand principles of cosmology remained invulnerable; the universe would continue to evolve along relentless and easily perceived lines. But the myriad details were infinitely more plastic. No mountain of calculations could assure next month's weather or the future of the human species. Every world and every twist of dust were plunging into a great unknown.

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The First Theory would have made Morris famous in limited circles and certain fat textbooks.

Lanes' Second Theory was the marvel, and the horror.

The young Morris was able to turn his thinking around. As a lark, he applied his new equations to the past, discovering that the same grand imprecisions held sway. Last month's weather might have been recorded by careful observers working with sensitive instruments, and history texts normally agreed on the presidents and their terms of office. But the past was far from being rigid and sharp and perfectly rendered. In a genuine sense, yesterday was just as unpredictable as tomorrow. That's what Lanes' Second Theory promised, and it seemed like a fun, neat notion: An astonishment that he happened to stumble across when he was thirty-two years old, freshly married, with his own imprecise future looking as if it couldn't be more splendid.

"This is a beautiful moment," the girl exclaimed. "A perfect moment, I think." That's how young people spoke today. All that mattered was the quality of this second, this heartbeat.

"Morris Lanes is a great, great man," she exclaims.

"Shoot me," he tells her.

The girl laughs. She laughs and glances at the gun in her hand as if surprised to find it there. Then she slips the gun back into its pocket, saying, "I remember, sure. His wife died. What was it that happened to her?"

"She was depressed," he whispers. "She took too many pills."

"Yeah, it was something like that," she allows. Then after making sure that the blinds are drawn, she tells him, "Turn on your lamp. But keep it at a low setting. Please."

He wants to believe this will help. With a light, he becomes a real person, and she won't be able to harm him so easily. But he's embarrassed to be seen. A shy old man, half-naked in the company of a feral young woman . . . it's a strange, unnerving torture that he wouldn't have believed when he was a young fellow. . . .

She is pretty, yes. Even beautiful.

"Morris? Are you really?" she asks.

He nods weakly.

"I'm a member of your church," she says.

"I don't have a church."

She dismisses him with a gesture, then says, "I'm walking the Perfect Past."

He manages to breathe. Once, with pain.

From her right hip pocket comes a machine with a passing resemblance to an old-fashioned Bible. She opens it like any book, activating its projector. A quantum computer sewn into the spine has been working night and day, manipulating her life story, using Lanes' equations in the same way hands shape wet clay. "My life," she says with a heavy self-importance. A strangely fetching smile brightens that pretty face, and she tells her computer, "I met Morris Lanes when I was a little girl. I just don't remember when or where."

Her past is accessed. The computer interfaces with the Net and its own cavernous data base, finding the most likely point of intersection between two very different lives.

The results appear to her as conjured images and soft sound.

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After a moment, the girl lifts her smile, reporting, "You spoke in Cleveland. At a conference about social change. I was six. My mother wanted to see you in person, and she couldn't get a sitter."

"But you don't remember seeing me. Do you?"

"Of course not. I was only six."

"And if we asked your mother about this supposed trip?"

The girl shakes her head and grins. "'History is our collective story about a past that grows increasingly unreal,'" she quotes. "You wrote those words. They're in your book. You were explaining that memory doesn't mean anything—"

He interrupts, telling her emphatically, "That's not true. Memory and history . . . they're very important constructs, and in substantial ways, they're still true. . . !"

"Morris," she says. "Do *you* remember ever being in Cleveland?"

He has to admit, "I don't remember, no." But he adds, "I traveled everywhere. I thought I could do some good, explaining my theories, debunking the media crap—"

"You don't remember that talk?"

"No."

"Your wife was there," she offers.

"She usually traveled with me. So what?"

The girl looks at old images taken from the Net. "A pretty enough woman, I think. Even in her forties."

"I remember my wife," he promises.

She nods and looks up, watching him with a warm curiosity.

"Memories have real meaning. And our history is genuine." He speaks with an exhausted conviction, pulling the sheets up around his waist as his voice grows louder and more brittle. "The Second Theory doesn't disprove or dismiss the past. All it tells you, in essence, is that *if* you could build a time machine, and *if* you jumped into the past, you'd find unexpected changes. The farther back you go, the larger and more blatant the changes would become."

"Okay," she says. "I travel back twenty years. I find my six-year-old self. Would her world be exactly as I remember it?"

He has to say, "No."

"It rained on my sixth birthday," she reports.

"And maybe it would again. Or not." Then he thinks to ask, "Do you honestly remember the weather on your birthday?"

She giggles, admitting, "Not particularly. No."

With a heavy sigh and a shake of the head, he adds, "But this is all just a mathematical game. An abstraction. We shouldn't let it mean too much in our lives."

"If I went back twenty years," she continues, "I'd find a world that logically and directly leads to *this* world. To *now*. Is that what the theory means?"

He has to admit, "It's what the equations say, yes."

"And that world *could* be *this* world," she offers, waving her Past Perfect machine in the air. "You can't tell me that this past . . . this wonderful life that I've built over the last ten years . . . you can't tell me that this past wouldn't be waiting for me. . . ."

"I can't, no," he admits. But he adds, "It's far more likely that you'd find one of the other trillion trillion pasts. Less interesting, maybe. But fun just the same."

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"Oh," she exclaims. "I've had so much fun in my life!"

"In your memories, or in that machine?"

She *tisks* him, then warns, "With practice, they become very much the same thing."

He shivers and says nothing.

She studies him for a moment, the menace returning to her grin.

"Why?" he sputters.

"Why what?"

"*Steal?*" He pulls the sheets tighter against his body, asking, "Why break into homes and terrorize innocent people, then take away their precious belongings—?"

She laughs heartily, remarking with an easy, effortless amorality, "Because, Morris . . . I want nice things. . . !"

He knows her answer, but he needs to ask the question. "Doesn't it bother you, even a little? Preying on people like you do—?"

" 'What we do today is fading by tomorrow, and lost the day after,' " she quotes. "And who wrote *those* words?"

"I did," he whispers.

"Maybe so, maybe not." Then she looks again at her Past Perfect, adding, "Hey, Morris. In this old photo, your wife has this nice fat engagement ring. Just to prove that you're real, why don't you show me that ring now. . . ?"

Morris was a new celebrity making a considerable living from appearance fees and the sales from his first book. He and his wife took the shuttle from Toronto, arriving in Cleveland by mid-morning. Their hosts warmly shook their hands, asked how the tour was going, then casually mentioned the bomb threats received to date and the various security arrangements that were to be made before evening. It was standard, routine stuff. Neither Morris nor his wife was particularly worried.

Tickets to the event had been sold out for weeks, but a portion of the audience belonged to conservative groups vehemently opposed to his vision of an ill-defined past. Morris began with a smile, calling out, "Greetings." In protest, perhaps three hundred people silently rose to their feet and left the auditorium. It was the expected gesture, useful to Morris and self-defeating for his enemies. He stood at the podium, waiting while another three hundred souls filed in through the metal detectors and found empty seats. He told the newcomers, "I hope you have longer attention spans than your predecessors." That barb earned him laughter, quiet and short-lived. Then he glanced down at a pile of notecards that he knew by heart, launching into what by now had become his standard lecture—an intricate mixture of high mathematics, simple illustrations, and heartfelt pleas for reason and for decency.

"Suppose we had a time machine," he told the watchful, sometimes worshipful faces. "This podium is the machine, and we'll use images recorded by these video cameras as an historic record. So what do my equations really tell us to expect from the past? Well, if we jumped back in time just a fraction of a second, you would see that this atom and that atom have switched positions. Perhaps. If we jumped back a full minute, you'd see macroscopic changes. My index finger that's *here* on the tape is suddenly *there* instead. And maybe I'm blinking instead of holding my eyes open. Small, small details. That's what you would notice at first. But details have a relentless way of piling on top of each other, and to our way of thinking, the past eventually becomes a very strange place.

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"Now, imagine that our cameras are old and durable. They've been recording for the last ten thousand years, without interruption. And the same tough cameras are set up around the world. Every moment has been caught on tape. Everything that we call 'history' exists as a series of permanent images. But if we ride our time machine back to the days of Rome, we almost certainly would be astonished. Nero and Claudius and Julius Caesar probably exist. Too much of our present world depends on their being emperors, and cruel. But the day-by-day details of the mighty Roman Empire turn out to be a remarkably fragile house of cards. The weather on a given day, or the words overheard in the town market: All things tiny will be changed. Even the peasant faces that we see in our videotapes will have vanished, replaced by other faces who could just as easily serve as our ancestors. After twenty centuries, there are an almost infinite number of solutions to the problem of creating this moment of ours. This instant. *Now*."

With a flourish, Morris solved his equations for a moment two thousand years in the past. Then he circled the perplexing answer, and he continued.

"My critics claim that I've destroyed history. That I'm making it possible for people to deny the Holocaust or the existence of Christ. But that isn't what I'm advocating. I believe in history. *Our* history. I believe in Hitler and Christ, Caesar and Gandhi. Romans built the old highways, and millions died inside the Nazi death camps. Without question, these events are real. But let me add this: Time is relentless, and it is enormous. And eventually it will swallow everything within its monumental reach.

"Our time machine takes us into the future. Ten million years from today, let's suppose. That future moment doesn't necessarily need things like Rome and the Nazis. Whoever lives there, and whatever they say about their history . . . well, the sad truth is that these people will have many strange possible pasts at their disposal. Pasts that don't demand our nation or our very specific beliefs. And if we then jump ten billion years into the future . . . well, let me show you what happens. . . ."

Again, with a practiced ease, he solved the equations for that huge, almost unimaginable span of time.

"By then, the human species has become unnecessary to many possible pasts. And even if we are the dominant organisms in our galaxy—the undisputed rulers in our corner of the universe—there will be an infinite number of perfectly fine pasts where we evolved on worlds other than the Earth, and there has never been a city called Cleveland, and nobody with my face and my name has ever done anything truly memorable. . . .

"Because, you see, in the final summation there is no such creature as *Memorable!*"

Again, the thief says, "Show me your wife's ring."

The old man shivers and forces himself to breathe, finding a knot of strength from some deep place. Then with a quiet, exhausted voice, he admits, "There is no key."

The girl snorts and asks, "Then how do you get inside that box?"

"Where the key would go? Flip the lock down."

She does it, and giggles quietly. "Neat. A fingerpad." Then, with that easy menace, she looks at him, remarking, "Ten fingers to choose from. Unless you want me to cut them off one at a time, why don't you do the chore for me?"

He feels warm, even hot now. A dull resignation comes into his motions,

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his mood. With the sheets pulled around his soft waist, he crawls over to the jewelry box, and when he extends his ring finger, the girl exclaims, "Just what I would have guessed."

For a moment, he hesitates.

Then he looks at her, saying, "Oh sure, I remember *Cleveland*. There was an incident. I'd just told the audience that nothing is eternally memorable—"

"Nothing is," she pipes in.

"And this big fellow jumped out of his seat and charged the stage. I don't know if he had a weapon. But I remember the man now. The security people had aisle seats, and five or six of them tackled him before he took a second step. . . ."

She is listening, enthralled.

Almost as an afterthought, he touches the fingerpad, adding, "I looked out at the commotion, of course. But what I remember seeing is a woman and what could have been her pretty little daughter sitting quietly down front, staring at me like you're staring at me now."

The young woman has to smile. She has no choice but to believe him, and in the next instant, she glances back at her Past Perfect machine, begging its computer to find some way to link his memories with her hope of hopes.

The jewel box comes open quietly, and he reaches in blindly. He once bought his wife a little pistol for protection. He grabs it and pulls it out, curling his index finger around the chilly trigger. Then he starts to say something, perhaps a warning . . . his thoughts are quick and muddled and mostly invisible to himself . . . and the young woman happens to notice him, dropping her machine and grabbing her own gun—

The gunfire is quick and remarkably quiet, a dozen tiny bullets puncturing flesh and bone, then halting their trajectory before they can escape the twitching body, before they can endanger the innocent or anyone's property.

The girl falls onto her back, drops into a perfectly motionless state.

The old man stares at the bleeding corpse. Then he flings the gun to the floor and grabs up the Past Perfect, using both hands to slam it against the titanium casing of the jewelry box, using all of his strength and fury—years of rage and withering guilt—until the machine's guts are strewn halfway across the room.

After the troubled man was led away, Morris looked down at the young girl, and he winked, reminding her and his entire audience, "But even as this moment vanishes into the chaos of time, and the next moment after it . . . even as our species and world recede into mere might-have-beens . . . some things are very much eternal. . . .

"For instance, every reasonable and imaginable future has to be built, at least a little bit, with kindness and charity playing their essential roles. . . ."

Again, he winked at the pretty little girl.

But she wasn't listening. She was busy tugging on her mother's sleeve, plainly asking, "When can we go, Mommy?" Admitting in a loud and defiant voice, "This is boring, Mommy. Boring! I want to go home *now!*" ○

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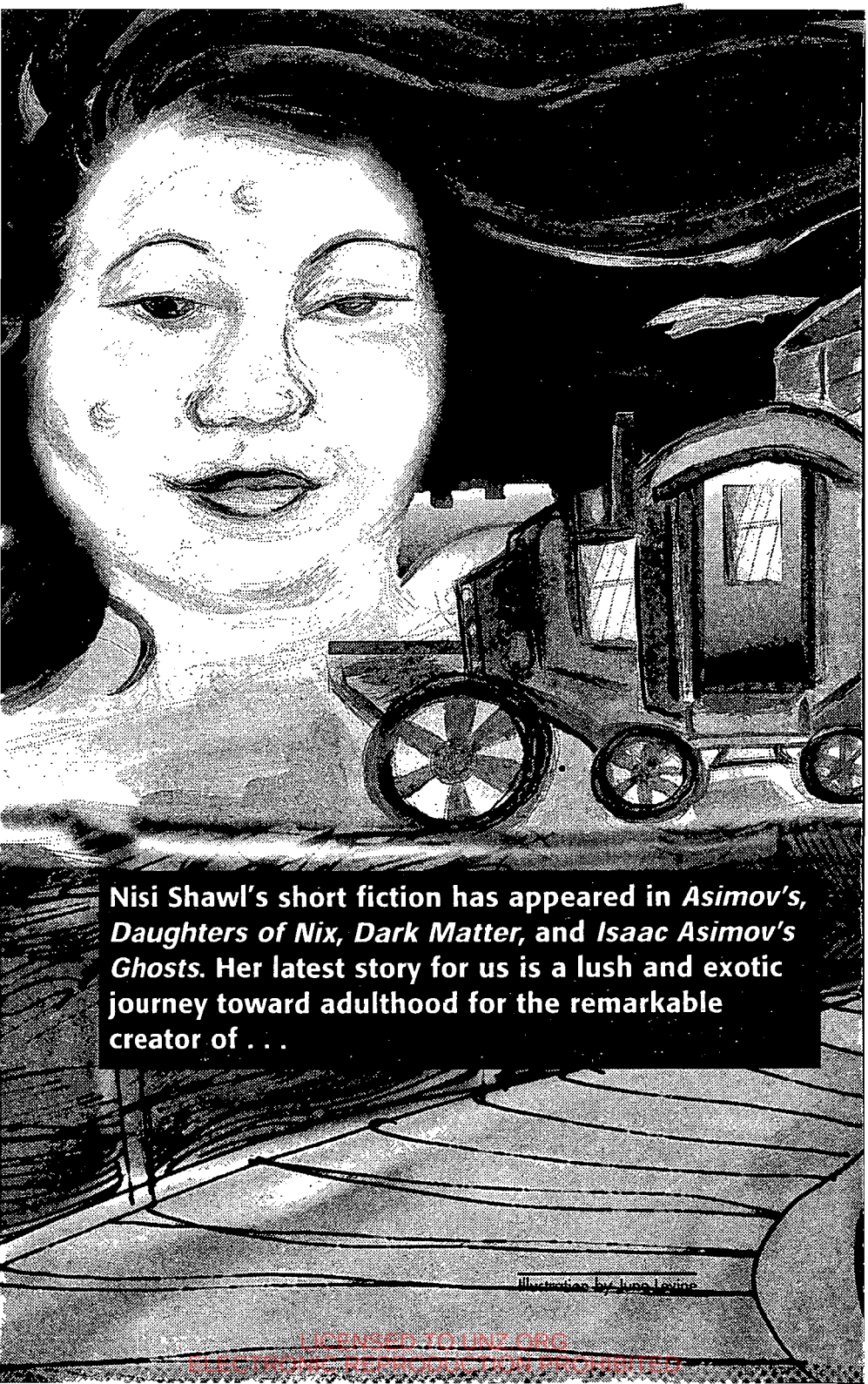

Nisi Shawl's short fiction has appeared in *Asimov's, Daughters of Nix, Dark Matter,* and *Isaac Asimov's Ghosts*. Her latest story for us is a lush and exotic journey toward adulthood for the remarkable creator of . . .

Illustration by Jonas Levine

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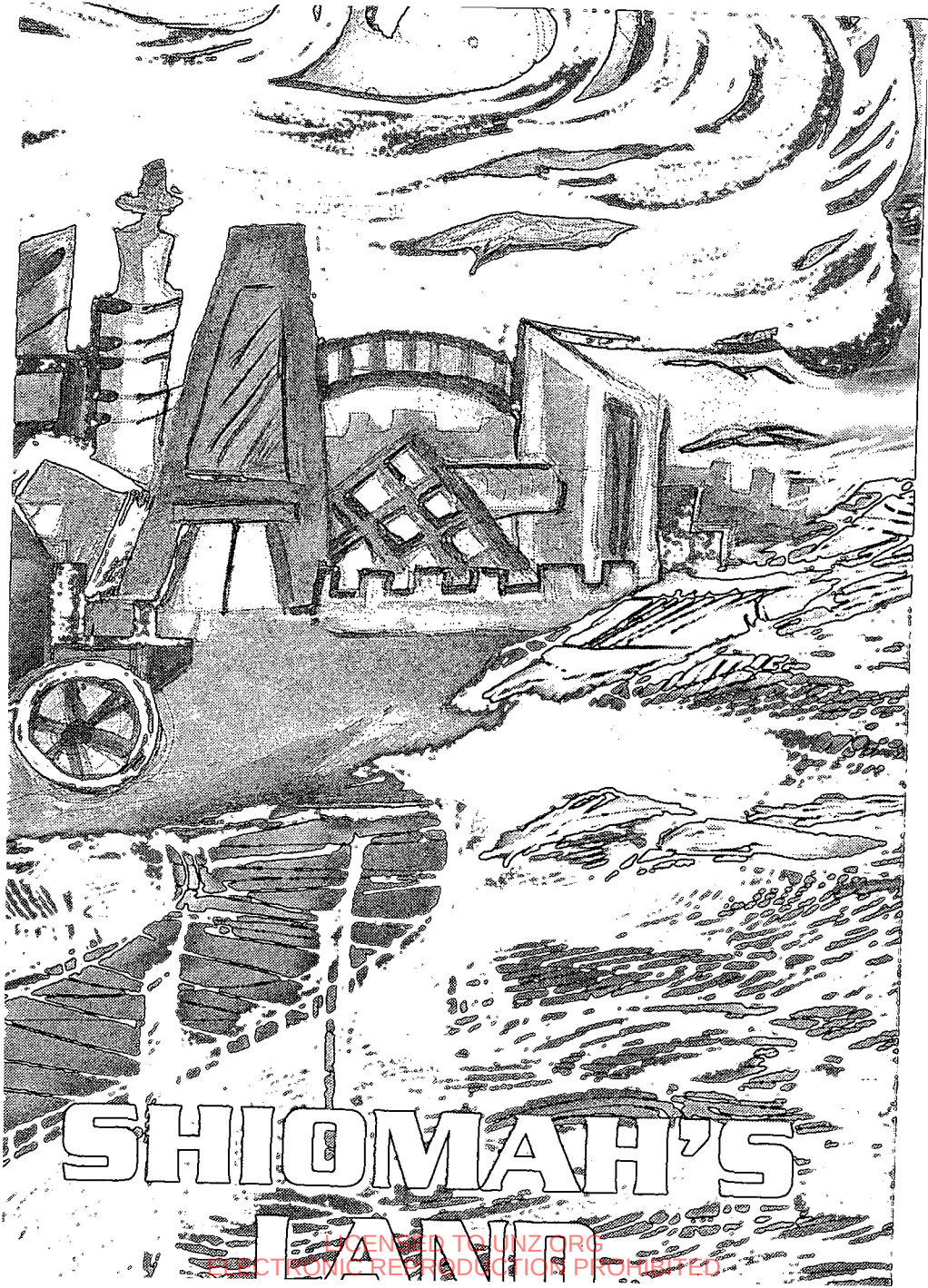

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I guess I'll never really know for sure whether my mother meant to throw herself to her death beneath the wheels of a god's carriage. She certainly had something in mind, for she kissed my forehead before she left me, first brushing my dark, unruly locks aside. Then she told me to stay still, and ran off toward the road. It looked to me as though she slipped, though she was actress enough to do that on purpose.

Perhaps she only meant to be maimed, slightly. Stories were told of mortals who had been restored after such accidents, and given handsome gifts as well; metals, or strange fabrics. She may have been aiming for these riches.

I didn't try to stop her, confident that she must know what she was doing. I was very proud of my mother; was she not the greatest glee-woman walking? She'd taught me all I knew.

Of course, anyone who has passed a Fertility Trial is exceptional, but the thrilling tale my mother told of hers convinced me that she was without match. Apparently she agreed with me privately, for when she was fit for travel we spent very little time with my father and his people.

I must have been about nine or so when we heard that my father's people had sent someone out to look for us. Or for me, to be more specific. They had been content to leave me in my mother's care at first, but I was now big enough to work strongly in the fields. Naturally, we decided to flee.

We took a raft a long way down a river, singing our way to Kimp Sinn, the city. It was said that the walls of Kimp Sinn were lined with foodholes, that one could see the gods on every corner. In a manner of speaking, these marvels were quite true.

Kimp Sinn is on an island in the sea. It is reached (unless you are a god) by a long, waltzing causeway. I still can remember the feeling of exhilaration we shared as my mother and I walked through the blue and white sky, gulls screaming around us.

In the city we found that many people had arrived there before us, and were already well entrenched. The plenteous foodholes, which produced more than enough food for all, were being controlled by certain individuals and groups. If no one could give them something of value in return for it, the food they could not eat was dumped into the sea. The gulls love Kimp Sinn. Their droppings whitewash the walls.

And as for seeing the gods on every corner, that was almost right, for everywhere there were glowing colored squares busy with flickering images of the gods. Some of them were said to reside upon the mountains of the island. Once in a great while one of their little silver carriages would roll down the hollow god road. . . .

Not many considered our "songs, dances, plays, and fooleries" as worth watching above a moment, much less offering goods for the privilege. Not when they could watch the god shows for nothing. That first evening my mother traded her horn earrings for some dairy and ceery for us, some sweet for me and a little smooth for herself. We had to trade again to get a roof space to sleep on.

The next day, we learned to catch and kill rats. There were two foodholes in Kimp Sinn that operated only when a ratskin had been dropped in. The generous caretakers of these places inserted the ratskins for one, taking only part of the food for themselves. Thus we made our way in a place where our work meant nothing.

We were waiting for one of the ships that Kimp Sinn's natives boasted

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sometimes came calling to the port. None came for a long time. They told us it was because of storms, though the sea was calm for as far as anyone could see. My mother believed them, she said, "for the sea is very big, Teekoige." At last a ship came, but it was going North, back toward my father's home.

As we waited for a Southern voyager, passing the days on the pier and the streets, hunting for rats and trading away our trinkets, I became aware of a secret interaction between my mother and a man named Obelk, one of those who took our ratskins. I got the feeling that he wished her to do something that she would rather not. It must have been something awful, or she would have told me about it, I am sure.

My mother cut off and traded her hair. I remember how heavy and dark it was, like sweet or sorghum.

One day, Obelk refused to trade with us. The others did the same, at his foodhole and at the other one where ratskins were accepted. We could not even get fresh water.

So I know my mother was in a desperate state as we walked alongside the god road. But I don't know what was in her mind. I didn't see her expression as she died.

She was thrown high into the air, then came thudding down in the road behind the slowing carriage. I ran screaming to her, but just as I reached her I was seized in a cold grip and lifted from her side. I stopped my screaming then, too frightened to breathe. I was carried to the carriage; up to a window in the wall, a window covered with glass.

Behind the glass, I saw a beautiful round white face, appearing to me like a full moon in the night. The moon smiled and said something I couldn't hear through the glass. The cold grip deposited me in a sort of bin at the back of the carriage, shutting the lid on me and plunging me into total darkness. I felt the carriage move.

I finished crying for my mother. I knew that she must be dead. After the movement had stopped, I was taken from the bin by the cold grip, which I saw belonged to a tall, shiny man, astonishingly costumed all in metal. For some reason I could not fathom, I fell instantly asleep.

When I awoke, I was alone, and I felt far away from death, my mother, silver carriages, rats, Kimp Sinn, gulls, the moon, and myself. I know now this was the result of the chemicals with which I had been treated. I lay there then not knowing this and not caring. I finally got up because I had to pee. Hunkering over the slit, I noticed that my locks no longer fell over my shoulders. Feeling with my hand, I found that an outrageously short fuzz was all I had covering my head. Also, I was naked (something that had not sunk in while I squatted peeing). I looked around for my clothes, but they were not in sight.

There was a mirror on one wall. At first, I did not realize what it was, because I was unaccustomed to such large, clear mirrors. It showed me not only my bony face but my pitiful brown nakedness, the pale sea-colored walls behind me, the slit, the foodhole, and the bedmat from which I had just risen. It acted like a mirror, so I believed that it was one. But suddenly it was no longer a mirror; it glowed like the god images on the walls of Kimp Sinn. Like a growing jewel, a picture of the moonface appeared, framed with lavender hair. I looked away.

"Teekoige!" called the picture's voice. My name, I thought, but I did not respond. "Teekoige? Teekoige!" The image faded.

I turned to the foodhole. It gave me some bean and veg, and some nice fla-

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vored water. I did some stretching, automatically at first. As my body warmed up, my thoughts began to cohere. I went over recent events. My mother's death maintained its distance. It was like something I had been sad about a long time ago.

One heard of those who had been actually taken up by the gods. These rare individuals were never again seen by mortal eyes.

In a little while, the square called me again. I ignored it. Then it threatened to shut off the food hole and the sluice for the slit until I "learned to mind my manners." This provoked me into answering that I did not need to use my manners to deal with a talking picture square. After a brief silence, the light dimmed out and the mirror returned again.

Shortly, it began to move, opening inward like a door. I snatched up the sheet from the bedmat to wrap myself in it. I need not have bothered, though; my visitor was also naked. Her skin and hair shining, the god who had killed my mother (but it must have been a *very* long time ago) said hello to me, half-frowning, half-smiling.

"Hello, Teekoige, then, if you will have no graven image," she addressed me.

"Hello—" I replied, with a heavy pause.

She took her cue. "Amma."

"Hello, Amma, midam," I said, happy that my mother had taught me something of the ways of the gods. Amma is worshipped for her effect upon moods, storms, accidents, and sudden changes. I curtsied deeply.

"I am sorry about your mother, Teekoige," she said, as if that took care of everything. For her, it *did*. For me, it only brought the realization that my mother may not have been entirely responsible for her own death.

Amma immediately wanted to know why I "would not speak with her over the vee," gesturing to the mirror. I could not answer her, so she continued. "Why did you manipulate me into coming here? Are you planning to kill me?" she asked with a friendly sneer. "No, of course not; we both know that that is impossible. Why?"

"I will do what you want me to do, midam," I replied slowly, "but I had no idea I should have treated that trick as though it were a real god. Such a thought never occurred in my head." I had a lot to learn.

Amma, however, seemed well pleased with my answer. My ignorance was exactly what she wished for, "for I shall not have to unteach you a lot of tiresome misconceptions, like those city-bred mortals.

"My dear girl," she went on, "you are absolutely perfect. Except for that horrible name." She clasped her hands together above her breasts, her nipples glowing like large rosy pearls. "You must have a stage name, something more mellifluous and resonant. Shiomah, that is it! Amma's Shiomah!"

Amma was a merry god, though capricious. Her form was always that of a beautiful, slightly plump woman, with hair and skin of varying colors. She used also to remove part of the weight of her hair so that it floated up shimmering behind her head as she walked or glided along. She never cheapened her elegance with so much as a ring. This was a marked divergence from universal custom; even bioservs wore shorts or tunics, or *something*.

Amma created and recorded adventures and dramas that were highly popular among the gods. She had nothing to do with the pictures that moved on the corners of Kimp Sinn. Those, she told me, were Nyglu's idea, produced by machines.

Machines are the gods' power. Machines give them their lives and their

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beauty. Amma showed me large and small machines, simple and complicated ones. Some are inside the gods, some embedded deep within the world, some fly constantly around the sky. Carriages, vees, foodholes, and servs are all machines. Machines speak and listen and reproduce and repair. They are toys and tools and objects of desire.

Amma knew me inside out with the help of these machines. Silver circles embedded in her hand allowed her to instruct them as to her wishes. They gave her all my secrets as I slept. They whispered to me through my dreams, teaching me things I would not remember until I needed to know them. I wore a ring in my ear that spoke her commands to me when she herself was elsewhere.

She controlled me in many ways; at first, from awe and also, I later realized, by using the words and intonations of my mother. After a while, I just wanted to please her, and for a very long time she did not even have to threaten me with the punishments she held in readiness.

I controlled nothing, directly. I could not even cause a door to open until Amma ordered a serv to accompany me everywhere, operating its fellow machines for me. Even over this, I had less than absolute power. It did nothing that conflicted with its basic paradigms, and often at first, I gave it impossible instructions.

"Go drown yourself!" I told it one day, in a foul mood after my sixth failure at forming a difficult construction in the Creative Mode (the gods' most difficult language). I knew perfectly well that the serv was operable under water, but I thought that it would at least try to obey me. Instead, it put itself on standby, locking in place and emitting a distressed, hiccuping click. Some device must have alerted Amma, for she came into my room almost immediately, with another serv that deactivated and removed my companion.

"You must not deliberately incapacitate my machines, Shiomah," she said, calmly but sternly. Her eyebrows lowered themselves into a lovely frown. "This particular episode does not stem from ignorance, does it?" I shook my head, chagrined. "If this continues, you will be denied all service."

I glanced around at my quarters. They were pleasant: sand-colored, papery-feeling walls, russet and amber appointments, wide windows from which to see the sea. Still, it was no place in which to be involuntarily confined. But I did manage to confound my serv on one other occasion, though not exactly intentionally. It was just that I couldn't understand why I didn't miss my mother more, and I thought perhaps if I had something tangible to mourn. . . .

This time two units came; one to attend to the damaged serv, the other to accompany me to Amma's tower. I followed it up, a heavy lump of apprehension inside my chest refusing to respond to the lift of the glide-way.

A rain the color of peridots curtained the entrance to my mistress's apartment. I stepped through. As sometimes happened, the rain failed to cease falling, and I was drenched.

The sun was at its zenith, and the iris of the tower's ceiling had contracted to a slit. Below its short overhang, a long window curved continuously, circled by blue sky. Amma sat with her pale green legs curled beneath her, bent forward to look at a display board set in the floor. Raising her face to me, she seemed about to laugh at my wetness, but then a deliberate lack of expression smoothed away the beginnings of her dimples. I took a towel from a knob on the wall behind me and dried myself as I went to sit before her.

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"You sent your serv to bring you your mother's remains," she half asked, half stated.

"Yes, midam."

"You knew the task would be difficult. Did you know how difficult?"

"I thought that it could ask for assistance; take a carriage; make inquiries."

"Inquiries of the gulls? Assistance from the herring? What do you suppose has become of your mother in all the time I have had you?" Her questions brought up that strange numbness in me, stronger than ever, a broad, flat humming that drowned out my answer as I formed it. I suppose I must have imagined the citizens of Kimp Sinn taking her away, burning her, urning her ashes. But the overwhelming nothing that I felt negated all possibilities. I hung my head in silence, ashamed of my speechlessness. How could I know that she had suggested this, had planted in my mind this bland substitute for grief?

"I will tell you what happened, my dear," Amma said, perhaps moved to some sort of divine contrition by my dumbness. "She was removed and disintegrated by the road's maintenance mechanisms. By now, she is scattered far and wide, and still dispersing."

She paused, her soft green fingers touching me under my chin, tilting my head upward. "You were asking for all the birds of the air, all the fish in the sea, every blade of grass upon the dunes, every sandcrab on the beach." She stopped again, holding my eyes with hers. "Why did not you ask *me?*"

The spell of numbness had passed at her touch, but still I couldn't answer. It had come to me that Amma did not want me to have a mother, alive or dead. How could I tell a god she was jealous of a mortal?

"Why did you not take her up in your carriage, with me?" I asked, neglecting to use the honorific. Her eyes narrowed, measuring me closely.

"I thought you might be of use to me," she replied, dropping her arm, "but I saw no need to carry around a corpse. Would it have been pleasant for you, in that dark, unfamiliar place, crowded in with your mother's body? I wanted you in the best shape possible, confident, unbroken, trusting yourself against the unknown." She stood suddenly, and raised me delicately with her fingertips. "Even in shock, your face seemed so dazzlingly young, yearning to see me through my window. . . . I thought you might be of use to me," she repeated, "and it begins to look as though I was right." Affirming her own good judgment, she nodded, smiling a small but brilliant smile.

To please her, I learned. I learned the shape of the world, and the depth of the skies, and their ways. I learned the gods' slow history, and their habits. Sometimes, I came upon obstacles in my search for knowledge; blank walls or steps built up into empty air. Amma approved of my frustration as a sign of my curiosity, helping me when she could, and promised that in time I would know all.

Contrary to what my mother had taught me, I learned that individual gods *do* die. If they are not done in by one of their peers, or by some accident during one of their frequent flirtations with death, they do themselves in. Five hundred years is the average lifespan. Many extend this several times, however, by being reborn.

But even this measure can only temporarily rescue a world-weary god. Sooner or later, one particular copy will develop such a deeply ingrained disgust for the futile repetitions that the process is discontinued.

I discovered that the gods did not take such a deep interest in the affairs

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of mortals as was generally supposed. The interest was sporadic, shallow, a matter of fashion. During one of the periods when it was considered stylish to notice mortals, the causeway and the city of Kimp Sinn were built, the scattered foodholes installed about the land to supplement the crops, the Fertility Trials viewed avidly. But the divine population of the island had been steadily decreasing, the wonder of mortal ways having palled centuries ago for most.

The exception to this was the ancient river god, Nyglu, the aforementioned producer of the vee shows of Kimp Sinn. He was also the innovator of the ratskin-trading foodhole. Nyglu's all-consuming passion was the study of mortals, by means of any and all disciplines. Considered by most of the gods to be a boring eccentric, Nyglu was included in Amma's circle partly because of some obscure genetic relationship between the two, and partly, I think, because of Amma's taste for the odd and sensational.

Throughout their friendship, she had humored his harmless pastimes, learning mortal speech at his insistence. Hearing of my acquisition, he had made her promise that I would be introduced to him at the first opportunity.

Amma held back on this for some time. She relieved me of some of my awe, and fed my own good opinion of myself until she felt I was ready. It was her plan that I should confront Nyglu with at least an elementary knowledge of the gods' languages and etiquettes, and with all my native audacity intact.

The meeting took place in my own quarters; familiar ground for me, new to my interviewer. He stared as though he would like to trap me on his sticky tongue. His eyes glittered beneath large, horny ridges. His skin was rough, wrinkled, and sprinkled with warts. He addressed me in First Speech, the one used with low-order mechanisms and bioservs. "Is it good that you are Amma's Shiomah?"

"Couldn't be cleaner," I replied, using the latest Juvenile Swerve. I switched to Obligatory Contract. "I understand that the information I represent carries some value to you, Mr. Nyglu?"

He actually blinked. Then we got down to negotiations, which went very much, I thought, in my favor. Credit goes to Amma for coaching me in being able to read the face of one so—different. But Nyglu had never needed to be shrewd, as I and my mother had. It was like bargaining with soft wax.

Amma was delighted with the outcome. She rewound the contract and played it through after Nyglu had gone, chuckling at the extent of my boldness. "So he actually paid you for the recordings I made when I found you, before you first woke up? He might have gotten those as a gift from me, had he asked."

"But I gave him no time to think of asking. And you said that I could offer them, midam."

"Yes, but it was your idea. And so was this performance you scheduled. I suppose you will need to use a bioserv for at least part of it."

"If I may."

She glanced at me from the corner of one mirthful eye. "Of course you may. I wouldn't miss it for an asteroid." She returned to scanning the contract. "Very good, especially this last part."

"The consultant clause?"

"Yes. Nyglu has never been able to get anyone to wade through his material before, so you flatter him, even at this price."

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It bothered me for awhile that I had not asked for a higher fee to review his work, but as my mother always said, it does no harm to have your customer feel he's gotten the best of the deal. And I certainly did well with what I had won.

The gods live in weary anarchy, most having long ago rubbed away the edges of their more troublesome desires by way of fulfillment. Aesthetic and social pressures exercise the only control. Any serious problems that develop (usually with the younger deities) are dealt with by interested parties, informal groups with as much license to punish the offenders as their own level of annoyance allow.

Under Amma's protection, I had just about any rights she chose to give me. She bestowed upon me all the privileges and powers she thought I could grasp. I set out to increase my earthly store, with an earnest intensity that my protectress found amusing. To the gods, wealth is no more than a diversion. I was a bottomless coinpurse, an everladen tablecloth, for Amma.

She adored the havoc my childish temper and unconventional questions wreaked upon her circle of acquaintances. These occurrences were a little like my earlier effects upon the servs, but for some reason, she found them much less irritating.

For instance, once she brought me with her to try out a new toy; a boat a lover had just given her. The lover, a minor god without physical affectations, was called Weyando. He was on board to demonstrate the boat's principles of operation, as he was the engineer of both the hull and the living sail. Also present was a certain young Lizore, related somehow to Weyando, and apparently to be my charge should Amma and Weyando find themselves too busy to attend to her.

Had she been a mortal, I would have judged Lizore to be about four years of age. Actually, she had just turned twenty-five, though she was still considered a child by divine standards. Although she appeared properly aloof in the presence of Weyando, her eyes took on a more interested expression the moment she was left in my care.

"Hurry, show me," she asked at once. "Are your genitals like mine?"

"Somewhat," I admitted. "Would you like to look at them, midam?"

"Yes, I just said so," she snapped. "I suppose you will want to see mine? All right, then." She reached for the hem of her shift.

"No," I said, "just tell me something, please. Answer a question."

"A question you shouldn't ask?"

I nodded.

"All right."

"What relation are you to Weyando?" Even I was astounded by my daring. Held distinct from sexual practices, the reproductive secrets of the gods are exactly that. Secrets. This was one of the topics upon which Amma had adamantly insisted that I remain uneducated. Any bioserv that became precocious enough to be coaxed into speculation upon the subject promptly disappeared.

Lizore's steely eyes glinted with new respect as she answered me. "His eggson is my spermfather." She looked up at me expectantly and I nodded in a show of understanding, lifting my hem to her examination.

"We are very nearly identical," she reported, in a disappointed voice.

I was quite as dissatisfied with my end of the bargain, until Amma explained Lizore's terms and others just as confusing. But that was much later, when she asked me to have her child.

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Weyando's gift was a success. The water foamed and hissed away below us, constantly changing into itself, showing all the colors of my mistress's moods. The sun warmed the sail, which turned itself constantly to the heat, a billowing net filled with a wind of light. At night, soft breezes pushed against its unfurled membranes, sailing us through the phosphorescent dark.

Day or night, Amma and Weyando were together; guiding the ship, gazing into one another's eyes, satisfying themselves with one another's sight, or sound, or smell, or touch, or taste.

Lizore and I were much in each other's company. Five days after our first encounter, I posed a question with an impact that far outweighed that of the first one I had asked. As Lizore and I silvered ourselves with glittering scales from the hull, she laughed at some witless pun I made. "Really, Shiomah," she giggled, "you're not at all boring! I find it hard to believe you are a mortal." She said it to praise me, so I tried to hide my offended pride, but my reply came sharply.

"If we mortals are so boring, midam, why did you gods bother to *create* us? If we *are* inferior, we are *your* work!" The paradox struck Lizore just as if I had slapped her baby-fat cheeks. Mortals, she had been taught, were tacky. Stupid, clumsy, disease-ridden—they were all this, and a great deal more that was anything but necessary.

"Come," she ordered, heading for the stern. At our approach, her spermfather's eggfather locked the controls and turned to her trouble-filled face. Amma lifted herself up from the deck on one elbow, watching with the expression of one about to be entertained. "Weyando," Lizore asked, "why do we need mortals? What did we make them for?" A short but devastated silence followed.

Amma rose from her languid pose. "I'll call the copter," she said.

"But why did . . ." Lizore started again querulously.

"Later," Weyando told her, with a quelling and emphatic glance in my direction.

After her guests left, Amma began to laugh aloud, tickling my ribs till I joined her. Her voice sounded like a wind-chime, the separate notes hanging in the air and striking one another like strung shells, soft yet clear.

When we had calmed down a bit, she made me sit with her on a little wooden bench. Then she took me by both hands and explained at length why my question had caused such discomfort.

"The gods do not *need* mortals at all. For *any* reason." At times, she said, there had even been crusades to have them wiped out. "But that's not at all fashionable now," Amma reassured me.

"And—" I coaxed her, knowing there must be more.

"Yes. Go ahead."

"And the gods did not make the mortals."

She nodded, pleased at my quickness.

"The gods—*were* mortals, at one time."

"It is not general knowledge. Especially not among children. But, yes, our remote ancestors and yours are one and the same." Her cheeks dimpled; she was fond of the unorthodox, and I piqued her with my impertinence.

"No doubt these facts had a bearing on the defeat of the drive for our extermination, midam." She nodded, eyes and hands suddenly intent upon disentangling some snarl in my hair. I continued my conjectures silently for a moment as we skimmed over the still sea.

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I myself could see the advantages of maintaining some sort of gene pool. I asked her whether there were any mortals who had been made into gods. I had in mind those who had been "taken up" before me, and of whom I had never heard or seen anything during my time with the gods.

She answered me with irritating equivocation. "Yes. Well, no, not really, although in a way, yes." I begged saucily for her to be more explicit.

"You know how we grow ourselves again, after we are dead?" I did. "Well, sometimes that is done with mortal flesh, and we turn them into a god that way." I thought it a rather crooked path to immortality, but I could not disapprove of it when I reflected upon the sort of god that Obelk the rat-trader would make.

I thought again of the foodholes and those who held command over them when I went for the first time to one of Nyglu's mudrooms. At all his homes, he had these moist, dark retreats.

While reviewing here what he had written (more material was available for my scrutiny now that Amma had made the mortal origins of the gods explicit), I asked him his opinion of Kimp Sinn.

He seemed unsure at first of how to answer. "It works well enough, I think," he equivocated, paddling his webbed feet in a dark pond.

"Well enough at what?" I asked impatiently. I sat cross-legged atop a table of long stone slabs, the driest spot I could find. "What is this city of the gods supposed to *do*?"

"It—you see, it provides a goal for the ambitious, and, even for the less motivated, an example—" he broke off and glanced up at me shyly "—of the beauty of our relationship."

"*Our* relationship?" I asked incredulously. We spoke Modal Society, but business still formed the main basis of our intercourse, as far as I was concerned.

"I speak generally, of course," Nyglu hastened to assure me. "Of the relationship between mortals and the gods, the gentle mentoring, the poignant reminder of our slower yet always inevitable decline, experienced in miniature before our eyes by your own people!"

"Oh." From the divine vantage, all our petty strivings, Obelk's and my mother's and my own, must look equally vain, foolish and pointless, and, on the whole, harmless. "How old are you, Nyglu?" Another of my tactless questions, with a wholly unexpected answer.

Nyglu flopped down on his knees before me. "What matters the difference in our years, charming child? My love for you is ageless!"

I felt lost. Was this a scene from some play in my repertoire? My lines, what were they? Cautiously, I extended my hands. It took a moment for the god to look up from his submissive pose. Then he seized my palms in his slippery grip and touched them several times with his sticky tongue. I withdrew quickly, disguising my disgust.

"Amma," I managed to pant out in my fright and confusion. "She must not discover us!" And I felt this to be true, no mere excuse for separating myself from him.

"Oh, sweetness, surely not," he said, his voice sad with longing at the loss of contact. "I can conceal our involvement from her. Trust me. Trust in my powers. Oh, Shiomah, we could make each other so happy!" I didn't think so. But I let him touch me, just a little. Just a little more.

It was not too long after this that I progressed to the point where Amma felt I was of some use to her in her dramas. I played first for her the role of

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Juusli, a young god who rebels against the ennui of immortality by refusing to behave in a socially responsible manner. Among Juusli's foibles was a refusal to allow her body to age into puberty. The piece was years in the making, so Amma had my growth temporarily halted.

Weyando came back to play the part of Jez, a more conventionally minded contemporary of Juusli's. No mention was made of the way that I had provoked Lizore's speculative outburst, but he did not bring his eggson's eggwife's daughter to play with me again.

The part of Jez's spouse, whom Juusli spends most of the piece trying to seduce, was filled by a beautiful bioserv that Amma referred to as a dryad. Amma spent much time with this pale and lovely creature, giving it detailed instructions covering every nuance of its role. The dryad would try to follow her directions exactly, and, if the results were not desirable, Amma would once more go over the entire action, changing it if necessary.

Sometimes I believed that the dryad performed poorly on purpose, simply to deprive me of my mistress's time. Professional pride kept me from following its example.

We spun around the globe, recording different parts of the story in different areas: ruins, deserts, the homes of friends, jungles, lakes, glaciers. . . . I saw that the sea *was* large, that mortals counted for nothing against the world's immensity. And that, although outnumbered six-hundred-to-one, the gods' five thousand left more of a mark upon the earth than the mortal three million, because they were more able to work on the world's scale.

There was a valley along a dead, dry river. All soil had been stripped from the land by some bored deity, and the bedrock had then been chiseled into tunnels and spires, a maze for the wind. Low, shuddering groans and high sounds that yearned to become music played around us there. Haunting murmurs and keening whistles accompanied every scene. It was easy to portray Juusli's essential loneliness in this land that mourned for itself.

Once, I looked up from the action of one of these scenes and saw, to my surprise, that tears fell from Amma's eyes. When she signaled an end to the session, I followed her to the other edge of the plateau we worked upon. As we walked, she seemed oblivious to me, but reaching the drop-off she stopped and called me to her.

Her tears left starry trails on her indigo skin, shining like her hyalescent hair. "Your performance is quite moving, Shiomah," she told me in a low, steady voice. "I am proud." So was I, for the scene just completed had been rather difficult. Juusli was struggling with the ghosts of her dead selves as they urged her to fling herself to another death. The difficulty lay in creating the physical impression of resistance while wrestling with the air. Departing from her usual procedure, Amma had chosen to screen-animate these devils after the recording, rather than manufacture bioservs that would only be demolished during their plunge into the canyon below. I was glad to have met this challenge so well, but I didn't think Amma cried for joy in my competence. I waited and hoped for an explanation.

Instead she asked, "If I were to assure you, Shiomah, that you would be given immortality if only you jumped over the edge of this plateau, would you do it?"

I thought of my mother, tossed high into the air, dead, no doubt, before she hit the ground. "No." I paused, weighing my position. "Of course, I would *have* to, if you commanded me to, wouldn't I?"

"But you have already answered my question," she stated, dismissing

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mine. "Here is another. If I asked you to throw *me* down there, would you?" I started to speak, but she continued. "If I did not *tell* you to, but *asked,* with no authority?"

I could not picture autocratic, arbitrary Amma with no authority, though I tried. "What would become of me, if I did?" I inquired.

My mistress laughed, all melancholy suddenly gone from her manner. "You funny thing! So selfish, so practical! Never mind. I will not ask you to kill me, for you would surely find it an annoying task!" Taking my hand, she returned with me to the others.

A later sequence was recorded on Nyglu's estate. Before his current obsession took hold of him, Nyglu had been fascinated with the order of amphibians, as his personal appearance showed. Perhaps this is why mortals associated him with rivers, and with fresh water in general. He certainly associated himself with it. Pools, bogs, swamps, and wet places of all sorts made up the bulk of his "grounds." When we visited, he still took great pride in showing the estate to his visitors, pointing out the particular species he had reconstructed from his studies. Some were immense and ugly, others small and subtle, effacing themselves into the dark, decaying backdrop.

There were also experiments, whims come to life. My favorites were the triphibians, a sort of winged salamander. Mottled scarlet and sky-blue, one came and perched briefly on my arm, then skimmed away. Seeing my delight, Nyglu hatched three eggs for me, and I spent my free time feeding and observing the larvae. Soon I had tame triphibians of my own, but I had to leave them behind when we went to the moon. Nyglu promised that they would be mine again when we returned.

The dryad was packed away in her trunk and we coptered off to meet Amma's sky shuttle. Weyando stayed behind; his character, Jez, didn't appear in the final scenes. As we floated away from the world, its immensity was belittled.

We spent a long time in orbit because of a hitch in the preparations for our landing. An ancient resort on the moon's surface was to have been restored to habitability without destroying the period flavor of the setting. Some too-authentic material used in the repairs had ruptured and released most of the complex's air. The old oxygen machines below the surface had long since been dismantled, and regular flights to and from Earth had stopped decades ago, at the end of the last space craze. It was a couple of days before more air was brought up. Trouble arose, due, in part, to our long confinement on board the shuttle.

In preparing me for the profession she had chosen for me, that of acting roles in her creations, Amma had given me access to all sorts of old cubes and reels. After I used up all the sleep tapes, she even taught me to read; not pictos like mortal writing, but words composed of letters, like these. While examining some written antiquities during the delay, I learned with real shock that the Earth had once been almost literally covered with mortals.

I ran to Amma in her cabin, craved to see her, was quickly admitted. What atrocity, I demanded of my mistress, had reduced the mortal population fifty-thousand-fold? As I asked this, I actually clutched Amma's elbow to stop her from turning away from me. She froze.

I whipped my hand away, startled at what I had just done. I had tried to use force to press my will upon a divinity.

But when she again faced me, she was smiling. Sadly. As if she had ex-

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pected this to happen, while at the same time hoping that it never would. As though I had pleased and pained her both, at once. "I will answer you, Shiomah," she said, "but first I am going to show you something. Something I ought to have shown you long ago." She extended her left hand.

Not for the first time, I noticed that the sides of her fingers and the edges of her palm were lined with numerous shining dots. "Activation of one of these circuits," she told me, "will wipe out a selected memory in your brain. I have chosen your mother's name." She let this sink in, then went on.

"Activation of a second will deprive you of the use of the centers of conscious volition. And the third," she promised, "will prevent the operation of your autonomic systems. Do you understand me?"

I nodded. "Yes, midam."

"Now. There was no disaster, no epidemic, no mass-murder of mortals. The current population, my dear, is a result of time and care and thoughtful planning." She made gestures with her hands, like a prince in a story, dispensing coins to a crowd. "Birth-control, ample food, lebensraum—the ancient fifty billion never had it so good!" I still had a lot to learn.

It was difficult after the revelation of these threats to reassume the role of Juusli, a character whose last motivation is fear. With relief, I removed my pressure suit in the simulated vacuum of the closing act, the heroine succumbing to the hallucinatory call of dust sirens. It was an ambiguous ending, with Juusli unharmed, drifting away with the sirens (specially made bioservs, of course), leaving a sparkling trail of palpable-looking dust.

When we returned to Earth, Amma let me age again, though more slowly than mortals are accustomed to do. She used me in other, smaller works, or in the social games she played with the other gods. Sometimes she devoted her enormous energies to my training, sometimes she seemed merely to relax and enjoy my company. Her attentions were far from constant. I would be ignored for months, a year at a time, then taken up again without, apparently, a beat skipped.

One afternoon, when I had been with her nearly fifteen years, she fancied that she would make love with me. My body was that of a fourteen-year-old, an awkward, pudgy beauty, but she was attracted. How can the gods ever tire of such pleasure?

In time, our desire was heightened by a burgeoning love. My adoration was natural, inevitable even. I think I had only been waiting to release it until I received some sign from her.

As to why she loved me, I can only say that not even mortal passions are easily subjected to analysis. Amma's love was fierce, and ridiculous, on the face of it. I still had pimples, at times. My nose was too long. I thought perhaps she confused me with Juusli, the first character she had created for me.

No deity questioned Amma's absorption with me. Such fascinations were not unheard of. Sometimes the infatuated god went as far as actually regrowing the mortal undeified, merely in faithful reduplication of the beloved original.

Those foolish gods! They should have known that this would not be enough for Amma!

She contrived to have me conditioned into partial godhood while growing, and then secretly disposing of, the expected replacement. Immortality was given to me for as long as I can stand it, and the powers of the god machines were made mine.

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The sins of my "mortal counterpart" were not visited upon the new Shiomah. Weyando's eggson's spermdaughter was again allowed into the circle of my influence. Others that I had alienated upon Amma's instructions made me welcome in my new guise, with calls of congratulation and invitations to their estates. With all this obligatory gaiety, it was almost a year before we settled in again back on the island.

Amma became more and more attentive. She involved me in the details of her creations, seeking advice on costume and dialog for her daring depiction of a god in mortal disguise. I decided to have my rooms dismantled, as I spent nearly all my time in hers. Everything was packed away except the terminal when she came to me with her offer of marriage.

I stared at her across the wide, bare floor. She was colored all turquoise, with hair like ethereal jade. She clashed horribly with what was left of the decor.

"Well?" she asked, a little sharply. "Don't you *want* to be my wife?"

"Oh yes, yes, Amma!" I managed to reply. Since being deified I no longer referred to my mistress as "midam." "I do, I'll be so happy, I'll make you so happy, only I am very much surprised. . . ." I trailed off. I came toward her, one eye on the terminal's screen. I did love her, and it meant so much to me to please her. She kissed the top of my head and clasped me to her.

"You should be used to receiving surprises from me by now," she said as she released me, smiling. "In time, you will grow accustomed to my ways, and come to find me quite boring, no doubt."

I shook my locks in vigorous dissent. "Never, no, never, Amma!" I took her hands in mine and kissed each sea-colored fingertip, saying "You are so sweet, so generous, so full of precious secrets—" I came to one of the little silver circles with which she controlled her underlings.

"Oh, yes, that reminds me," she said when I did not continue. "I almost forgot to tell you. I'm going to have those signals removed, those ones I told you about on the moon." I met her eyes. They were dark, gravely serious in her expressive face.

"The ones you said could erase my memory or destroy my nervous system?"

She nodded. "Now that you've consented to engage yourself to me, there's no danger of those circuits ever being engaged!" She grinned, suddenly in an impish mood, and I perceived the pun (no pun at all in mortal speech) almost at the same time as I saw the call light blink on the com screen. Pretending to be disgusted with the lowness of her humor, I managed to shove her playfully through the door before she noticed the flashing signal.

As I had expected, it was Nyglu. His warty face showed satisfaction to my trained eyes. "I have the body," he reported, "and the other arrangements are under way."

"Very good," I told him. With the passage of time, I had grown used to my deepening contact with Nyglu, and the leverage it gave me. "Then you may count on my presence in your mudroom—" I hesitated. Amma had planned to leave for Nyglu's estate this evening, but there was no telling when I'd be left alone there, now that we were betrothed. "Whenever I can come without Amma knowing," I hastily amended. Nyglu looked as if he wanted to protest, but to whom? Not to me. I switched off the screen and went looking for my mistress.

We were wed in a short but impressive ceremony aboard the ship Amma had been given by Weyando. I begged her to wear some form of clothing, and

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at last she compromised by causing her hair to cling to her nakedness, covering almost all the right places. By contrast, I was draped in fluttering, dune-colored fabrics, designed to hide the tiny scars and other imperfections my body carried. True, we might have said that Amma had caused my replacement to be grown bearing these marks, but I desired to avoid explanations.

The wind sang in the rigging, our only choir. The sky, as ever in those latitudes, was a vaulted dome of blue. The child Lizore joined our hands as we pledged our love, "as long as its life continues." After kissing one another's eyelids, we turned to bestow our wedding gifts upon our guests, all of whom, at Amma's insistence, were actually present.

As we passed among her friends and relatives, Amma made sketchy introductions to those I had not yet met. "Hayvre, Lizore's eggmother," she named one black, black woman who reached out to clasp my hand in one that sported two thumbs. "Elleefaw" was a tiny, shaggy, sexless looking god in spiked heels. I recognized the name as belonging to the deity of unpleasant truths.

"He makes the best monuments. We used the Hill of Glass in my last piece, Elleefaw," she said to the short, red-furred god. "It was perfect, especially the way it opens and closes like an eye." Elleefaw nodded his approval of this tribute, running his own sharp eye up and down my pudgy awkwardness. I felt uneasy in his presence, and I wasn't made more comfortable by the remark he made as he walked way. "Now you'll each find out what the other is really like!" he announced over his shoulder, clip-clopping off across the deck. But surely we had learned all that in over twenty years?

I was glad to see Nyglu, preferring his familiar strangeness to these upsetting new acquaintances. Our encounters had been curtailed since the betrothal, and he was glad to stay by my side when I asked him to, as a sort of buffer.

"I don't know why you couldn't broadcast the ceremony like everyone else does," he complained to us in a mildly fretful tone. "But I must admit that I am enjoying myself," he added politely (and perhaps also to prevent Amma from detecting his morose jealousy).

My mistress hadn't explained to me her reasons for an in-person celebration, but now she said "This one isn't for show. *This* one is going to last." With a fond look, she walked away from me, taking our glasses to be filled with the bright, frothy drink that was being served.

Still disturbed by Elleefaw's pronouncement, I was silent until Nyglu wondered out loud if anything was wrong. "Do you think everything will change now?" I asked him. I expected denial. His precarious happiness, his treasured times with me, would work to keep him from accepting the possibility of a different course in our lives.

Instead, he shrugged, resigned. "Change," Nyglu answered, "is Amma's only constant."

For several months after our marriage, all remained the same. I continued to work for Amma as before, to make furious or languid love with her, to study and transact my own business. I acquired islands, asteroids, and watersheds entirely my own, as well as other, less common commodities. Nyglu took care of this for me, with all the discretion I relied upon him for.

Then Amma decided that we were going to have a child. The new Shiomah might have asked upon deification how gods were born. Perhaps Amma attributed my lack of curiosity on the subject to habits formed in earlier

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days. I could hardly tell her of my source. Instead, I massaged her hands, pulling and stroking her pale violet fingers as she recited the possibilities to the tower's open ceiling, full of stars.

"We can mate as mortals do," she whispered, "or we can let machines do it for us. Two males can join genetic material, or two females. We can mate with ourselves or with those long dead. Just as soon as you're ready," she said, "we'll start taking the enzymes that neutralize the sterilizing compounds." She sighed as I dug into the fleshy mound beneath her thumb.

"And then?" I asked. But in answer Amma held her hand to my mouth and brought mine in turn to her delicately nipping teeth. Her excitement at the thought of conception made further details impossible to come by until dawn.

What Amma offered me was the opportunity to impose my genetic message over that of a microscopic animal. The animal would then be injected into a donated sperm cell, and the sperm cell would join with an egg of hers. This was fine with me; I leapt at the chance for another sort of immortality. Amma and I disagreed on only one important point; I wanted her to carry the baby in her own body. Even for just a short while. She would not; not even her innate love of the curious made pregnancy appealing to her.

I offered to bear the child within my own body. She pointed out that to do so would endanger the lie we lived. "Only a mortal would allow itself to be invaded in such a manner!" she declared hotly. Anyway, what did it matter that our wombs were empty; we would still be mothers as the gods saw things.

It mattered to me.

Weeks passed. I took to sulking in my old refuge, the brown-and-russet rooms I had occupied before our marriage. Gradually, I brought the furnishings out of storage, determined to be comfortable in the midst of my self-imposed exile. I avoided Amma, keeping to my own apartments as much as possible.

Finally she came to me, persuasive and proud. I slouched on my couch seat, not looking up as she lowered herself beside me.

"Don't pout, Shiomah," she said, putting an arm around me. She laughed. "I could walk to Kimp Sinn on your lower lip!" That made me smile, but I quickly pretended that I never had.

"Our ways are better, you will see," she continued, coaxingly. Pale blue, she rested like a piece of sky on the brown slopes of my shoulders.

I shook her arm off, standing up and walking away angrily. "Your ways? You *have* no ways! You do nothing except let things be done *for* you!" In the silence that followed, I felt the presence of Elleefaw, happy that we did no better than he had expected.

"Oh, Amma," I said remorsefully, turning back to her again. "Why do you oppose my will?" She was displeased that I had a will, rather than a mere collection of childish whims, that I had walked away from her, that I stood and she sat. Seeing this, I knelt, thus allowing her to continue to be gracious.

"Have I not treated you well, my dear?" she asked. Her fingers sought my hair, toyed with my tangles. "Have I not given you everything you ever desired, and more?" No, I thought, for my mother is gone, and you refuse to take her place. Deaf to my inner voice, Amma continued to talk of how she had spoiled me, ignorant of my deepening resolve.

"So you must understand," she concluded, "that it will be best for both of us if you yield to me in this."

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"No," I said, and her hand ceased fondling my locks. "If you make a child this way, it will be without my consent. You will have to kill me then, to keep me from confessing our crime!"

She stood, pushing me away from her. Her celestial face paled, a touch of cirrus in the sky. "You can't mean it," she said, quietly appalled. Bestowing immortality directly upon a mortal, as she had done, was inconceivable; the punishment for our deception would be of a kind with it. The gods are jealous.

"But I *do* mean it," I said, rising and meeting her eyes without wavering. "No machine or half-animal is going to carry our child, Amma, not while I live."

She stared until she saw that I was in earnest. Then, for the first time in my life I experienced divine wrath. She stamped the floor with one lovely foot, and clenched her fists in front of her angrily heaving breast. "You fool!" she shouted, purple smudging her pale blue cheeks. She laughed harshly, metallically, an untuned gamelon. "You funny, funny fool!" Then she activated the first of the three circuits she had shown me years ago as we orbited the moon, and had, of course, never disabled.

My mother's name is gone, removed from my mind and all my records. And the erasure is permanent and self-reinforcing. Even if someone told me what my mother was called, I would forget the sounds as soon as they were said. Even if I wrote her name here as it was spoken, I would forget it as soon as it was read.

Amma is a capricious god, but thorough.

But shrewd as I am, I had made my preparations. Even as she was proving her remorse by destroying her other controls, I left and fled here.

I do not know if she was fooled by the death of my double. Nyglu was careful, but perhaps she will discover that he hid it for me when she thought she'd had it destroyed.

Perhaps she will not be deceived. Perhaps she will come and test my defenses. For all I can tell, though, she is even now working on another Shiomah, perhaps one just a little less hard-headed. I left her plenty of tissue samples.

It was foresight that made me search out this corner of the world, rich in plant life and rare minerals. It is mine through my efforts, and I have stocked it with my treasures. My horses, and cattle, and machines, and Fertility Manna. My plunder and purchases.

And the men and women, my mortals. I will take very tender care of my little mortals.

And they will bless the land in my name. ○

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GULLIVER'S BOOTS

To more quickly speed the long-traveling Gulliver's return to his home,
the Governour of Glubbdubdrib gifts the weary traveler
with a pair of what he calls "exponential boots."
Each step, he tells Gulliver,
will carry you precisely twice as far as the step before,
and thus you will stride back to your homeland in but a few score steps.
Gulliver accepts the boots gladly.
"Be thou careful," the sorcerer-king cautions. "For—"
But Gulliver, pleased with his gift
and the prospect for a hasty return to his beloved home,
pays no heed; already he is striding
five feet to a pace,
ten feet,
a score
In a moment he is striding
a furlong,
a quarter mile,
a half mile at a step.
He strides, and in a blink he passes
Taprobane,
Kashmir,
France.
In an error of judgment, he strides once more:
Iceland
And turns back:
Australia,
the northern pole
with each step the amazed Gulliver finds himself even farther from his goal.
Another step takes him beyond the Earth,
and he sees the globe in its entirety,
a glistening sphere of marbled white and blue,
hanging unsuspended in the diamond-studded void.
But, remarkably, the magical boots take grip on empty air,
and so Gulliver turns once more,
and blindly steps toward home.

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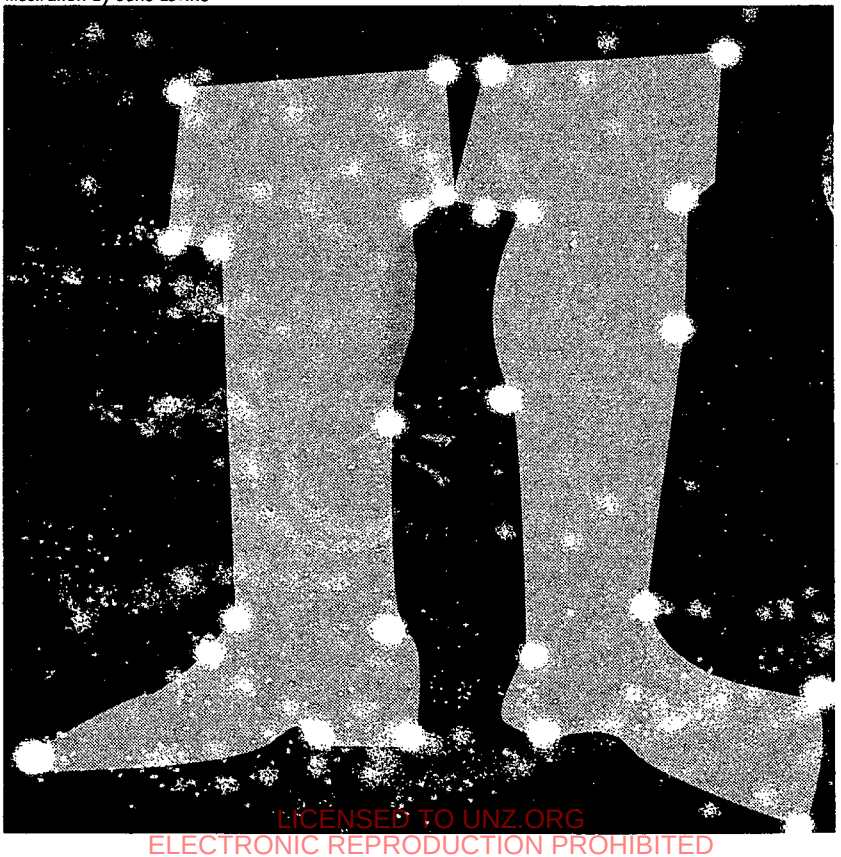
Gulliver has long since lost sight of
the tiny blue dot,
the orb which held his home;
he has lost among a million million stars
the speck of fire
that had been his sun.
He thinks he can still tell, among the myriad pinwheels of light,
the smudge of light
that he had once familiarly called the Milky Way
–but he is no longer quite as certain as he had been.
For Gulliver is no mathematician.
He doesn't know
in exponential boots,
no matter how long he strides,
Once he has passed any place
he can never go back.

–Geoffrey A. Landis

Illustration by June Levine



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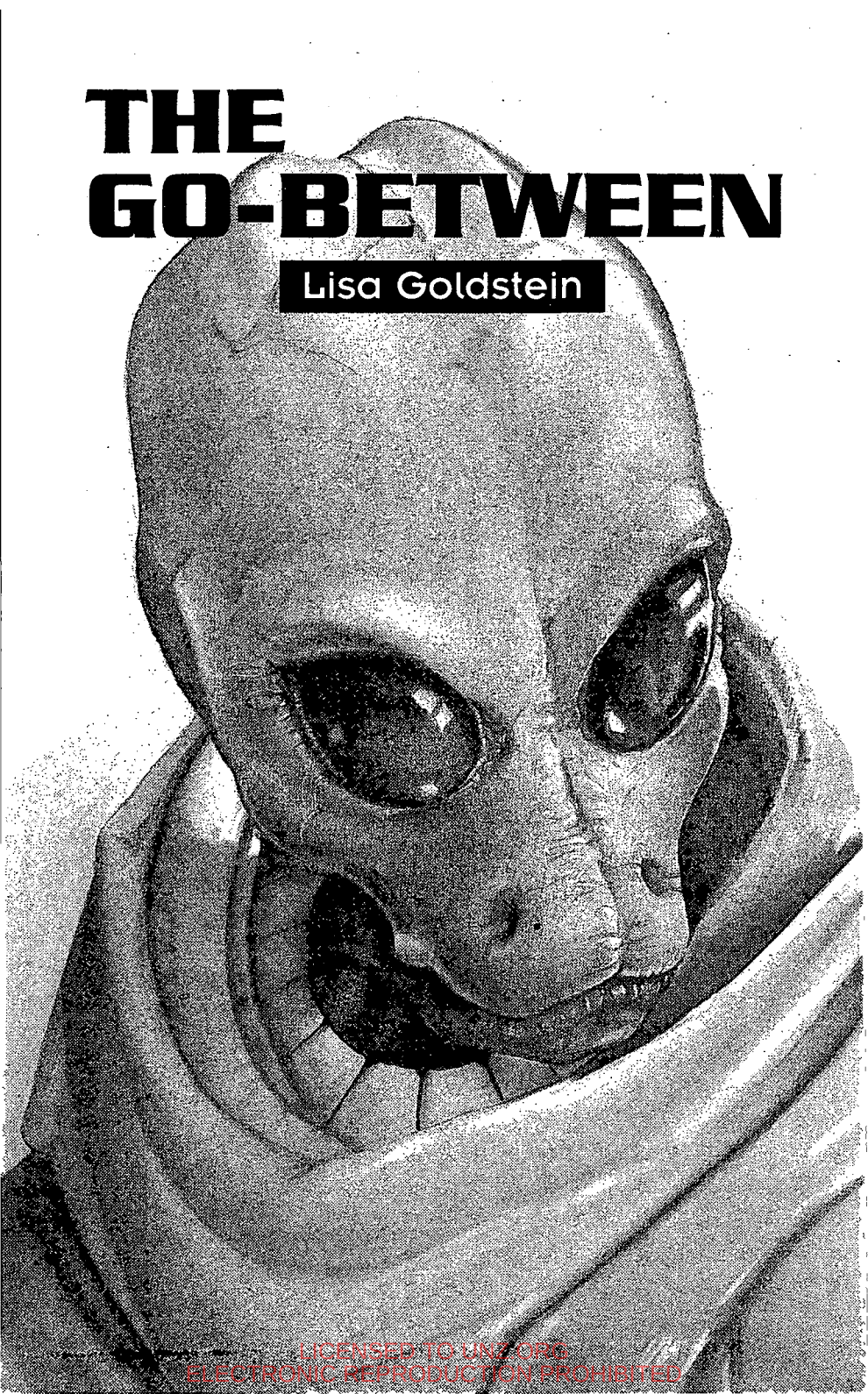
THE GO-BETWEEN

Lisa Goldstein



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Of her latest tale, Lisa Goldstein says, "I never knew I was a dog person until I was in my forties and got a dog (or she got me). Dogs are fascinating partly because they are so intelligent, and it's possible to figure out (sometimes) what they're thinking. I'll probably never meet chimps or dolphins or aliens, so being with a dog is my only chance to interact with an alien intelligence" The paperback edition of her book, *Dark Cities Underground*, was recently published by Tor.

Illustration by Darryl Elliott

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The car moved through the dim streets of Port City, the driver slowing every so often to point out the sights. Here was a good bar, there the hospital, that huge building across the street a military barracks.

Majli looked out the rear window and tried to fix it all in her mind. Everything looked vaguely familiar, the same concrete prefabs SpaceAdmin threw up on every planet she had ever been posted to. But this one was different. This was her first plum assignment, an ambassadorship. If she did well here on Malku—if her negotiations were successful—there was no telling how high she could climb.

She strained to see through the indistinct light. They passed squat trees with right-angle branches and soft furry leaves, blue-green, gray-green, pale purple. Fog rolled down the mountains like a wave, further obscuring the view outside. She switched on the interior light and took her notes out of her briefcase.

When she looked up next, the car was pulling up to the embassy compound, an imposing building compared to the surrounding prefabs. She caught a glimpse of her face in the rearview mirror, level gray eyes, thick light-brown hair. Tendrils of hair had already come free of the tight bun she had fixed this morning, and she sighed and pushed them back.

She opened the door and stepped out. "This way, Madam Ambassador," the guard out front said, ushering her though the front door. She was not yet used to the title; it gave her an absurd feeling of importance and she shook her head to dispel it. She needed to be clear headed, especially now, for her first meeting.

She walked through the huge foyer, her heels echoing off the green marble floor, and presented her credentials to the guard at the front desk. "Yes, of course, Ms. Iris," the guard said. "The conference room is down the hall, the first door to your left."

Nearly everyone was in the conference room already, ranged around the metal table. She sat at the head and bent over her notes again. After the soft light outside, the room seemed harsh, too bright, though it was only what she was used to back on Earth.

When the last person arrived, she looked up. Of all the people there, she knew only the vice-ambassador, a fussy young woman who had met her late last night when her ship touched down. She took a deep breath. Okay.

"Hello," she said. "I'm the new ambassador, Majli Iris. I'd like you all to introduce yourselves, please."

She met, in turn, the Chief of Protocol, the anthropologist and two members of his team, the vice-ambassador again, the base commander and his adjutant, and a few others. Her memory for faces was poor, a bad trait in a diplomat. Fortunately, she had a dossier with all their names in her briefcase.

"Thank you," she said when they had finished, looking around the table. "As you probably know, I've been sent here to renegotiate the terms under which we lease Port City from the Hwaru. We want—we need—more space. This location is crucial if we're going to expand into the neighboring systems. If the estimates are right, we'll need as many as twenty ships taking off from this port every day."

She looked at each of them again, slower this time. "So what I want from you is your best behavior. We have to prove to the Hwaru that we'll make good neighbors. That means no socializing, except at officially sponsored events. No insults or slurs, even if you're just talking among yourselves. No fighting with them, of course, and no sex."

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A few of the men smirked at that last. And she knew that it would prove impossible to enforce; she just hoped she could keep the incidents down to a minimum.

"All right," she said. "What do I need to know that wasn't covered in the briefings?"

The muted roar of a ship taking off sounded outside the building, and the windows rattled in their frames. "Madam Ambassador," the anthropologist said. Delgado, his name was, Delgado something or something Delgado. She nodded at him.

He switched on the holo display on the table. An image of a Hwaru appeared. The figure was shrouded in a voluminous hooded robe, but the robe opened at the front and she could see how lean it was, the bones showing in odd places. The thin ones are the males, she remembered. He was blacker than anyone she had ever seen on Earth, a reflecting black like onyx or coal, and his robe matched his skin. Gems glinted at his neck and wrists. His nose and jaw thrust forward to form a snout.

"This is a male," Delgado said. "He's about seven feet tall—you can't really see the scale in this picture. There is pronounced sexual dimorphism among the Hwaru—the females are shorter and rounder. They are organized into clans, with something like a king at the top. . . ."

"Yes, yes, I know all that," Majli thought. She forced herself to look as though she were paying attention. Delgado was short and stocky, with a face that could have come directly from a Mayan frieze: slanted forehead, straight aristocratic nose, full wide mouth. She would have to stop him soon; she would meet the Hwaru the next morning, and she still had a great deal of reading to get through.

". . . and he has a dog," Delgado said.

"I'm sorry. Who has a dog?"

"The one who calls himself Go-Between, or the Go-Between. He's the one you'll be dealing with. The king is present at all the meetings, of course, but he never says anything and we're working on the hypothesis that he's just a figurehead. We think it's Go-Between who makes the policy. Anyway, he brings a dog to all the meetings."

"Where did he get it?"

"It's probably one of the strays at the port. People bring them from Earth and then find out they don't have the time or energy to take care of them."

"Well, that's interesting. What else can you tell me about the meetings?"

"Well." Delgado hesitated; she saw that she had derailed the lecture he had prepared. "There's a lot of silence. It's a little nerve-wracking at first—you start to think they're never going to say anything at all. You just have to wait it out."

"They have a funny smell, too," the commander's adjutant said. Everyone turned to look at him. "The Sheepfaces. They smell funny."

Majli's head jerked up. "The what?" she said.

"The Sheepfaces. I'm sorry, but everyone calls them that."

"You're more than sorry," Majli said. "You just disobeyed a direct order. Or weren't you listening when I said no slurs?"

"I'm sorry, I said. I won't do it again. Everyone says it, though. They say worse things."

"No, you certainly won't do it again. You'll report to the personnel office, collect two weeks' pay, and leave on the next ship out."

The adjutant opened his mouth to say something, closed it, then stood

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and walked stiffly to the door. A few people watched him go; the rest pretended to study their notes or look out the window.

Her heart was beating fast. She waited for someone to mutter one of the words she hated, "bitch" or "slag," but no one said anything. She had to do it, though; she had to make an example of the man, to demonstrate that she took her authority seriously and that they had damned well better take her seriously too. God, and she didn't even know the man's name.

They talked for another hour about what she might expect from the Hwaru, and then she adjourned the meeting.

The car arrived the next day to take her to the Hwaru's dwelling. They drove in the opposite direction from the embassy, stopped at the checkpoint on the outskirts of Port City, and were waved through.

Once they passed the checkpoint, the car bumped along dirt roads, some of them barely wide enough to accommodate it. Mountains loomed ahead of them in the indistinct light. As they came closer, she saw low rambling structures built along the foothills, barely distinguishable from the mountains behind them.

No, it was just one building. The Hwaru's dwelling, made of dark gray stone, seemed to run for miles along the base of the mountain. They pulled up before a section slightly higher than the rest and she got out.

Majli was a tall woman, but the Hwaru who stood at the door to greet her was far taller, a male. None of the briefings had mentioned his eyes, which were as onyx-black as his skin, with no whites. They were disconcerting in that night-dark face, and very difficult to read, especially in the vague light.

And, as Delgado said, he had a dog. A very ordinary-looking dog, a medium-sized mutt with shaggy black fur and an even bushier tail. It trotted forward to sniff at her politely.

She was surprised to feel a twinge of annoyance, almost jealousy. Dogs and people had kept each other company for tens of thousands of years; dogs had willingly, even eagerly, thrown their lot in with humans. Would they do the same for any sentient being? Did the ancient bond between dogs and humans mean nothing to them after all?

"My name is Go-Between," the Hwaru said. "I am honored to invite you to our hearth." He bowed and she followed him inside.

As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, she saw that he meant the word "hearth" literally. Fires glowed in two opposite walls, their flames golden; they and the smoky candles in sconces along the walls provided the only light in the room. A tall stone chair stood at the end of the room, a throne. She squinted to make out the figure seated there, but she already knew who it must be.

"I have the honor to present my king," Go-Between said. His voice sounded overly loud; were the Hwaru slightly deaf? "King Darhu, this is Ambassador Majli Iris."

She bowed to the other Hwaru. Now she could see that he wore jewelry at his neck and wrists, more than Go-Between, and a circlet of gems bound his forehead. Even the jewels were dim, deep red and dark gold. "I'm honored, my lord," she said.

The king said nothing. She became aware of the smell the adjutant had mentioned. She could not put a name to it but it was not unpleasant, a warm, sweet odor, slightly spicy. Cinnamon?

Several Hwaru children chased each other through the room, shouting

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and making a noise that sounded like growling. The children were small and plump: were they females, or did the sexual differences only show up at puberty? Dogs played at their feet. Two women came in and lit candles from the fire.

"He is honored to meet you as well, Ambassador Iris," Go-Between said.

Majli forced her attention away from the chaos in the room. Delgado had mentioned this in one of his reports; he called it "lack of separation between public and private spheres."

Go-Between indicated a chair at the base of the throne for her. As she sat, the others arrived, the anthropology team and the vice-ambassador, and Go-Between ushered them to seats as well. The dog came and nuzzled at Go-Between's hands, then curled up and went to sleep on a pile of blankets by one of the fires. Majli marveled at how well-trained it was.

The Hwaru's skin glittered in the light from the fires. They were the color of coffee beans, of polished black shoes, of cockroaches. As her eyes grew accustomed to the light she noticed a tapestry worked in gold thread behind the throne, a complex tracery of curves and lines. Gold flashed as the fire played over it.

"King Darhu wishes to know how you like our country," Go-Between said.

"I like it a great deal," Majli said. In fact, she had not seen very much of it. SpaceAdmin placed top priority on expanding Port City, and she had been rushed to the negotiations without any time for sightseeing. Fortunately, she had read enough to be able to say a few complimentary things about the planet.

Go-Between said nothing for a long time. Children played, dogs barked, the life of the hearth went on loudly around them. Majli felt a strong urge to fill the pause with trifles, to say anything at all, but she restrained herself: this was just one of the silences Delgado had mentioned. Finally, Go-Between said, "The king is very pleased."

As the conversation went on, Go-Between continued to do all the talking while Darhu remained silent. Was Delgado right then, was Darhu a figurehead and Go-Between the true power on this part of the planet?

She found herself talking directly to Go-Between instead of the king, and had to force herself to include Darhu in the conversation. It was difficult, though, to focus on either of the Hwaru; because their black eyes had no whites, she couldn't tell half the time what they were looking at.

They made small talk for the next hour, each side feeling the other out. Majli felt disappointed that they were not making better progress, but she knew from experience that negotiations like this one took time.

Finally, Go-Between stood; apparently, the meeting was over for now. The dog woke up and stretched and went over to Go-Between. Once again, she felt a sort of betrayal that humanity's oldest friend should attach itself to this alien being.

"What's his name?" she asked.

"She is a she," Go-Between said, then added something in his own language. The dog looked up eagerly, and Go-Between scratched her behind the ears. "Loyalty is very important to us," he said. "The name means something like 'Loyal' or 'Faithful.'"

"Fido," Majli said, trying not to laugh.

"What?"

"It is a name we have given to dogs for many years," she said. "Loyalty is very important to us too."

"I am glad to hear it," Go-Between said.

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It was mid-afternoon by the time they left the meeting but the planet's shadowy light made it seem like evening; Majli had to shake off a feeling that night would fall any minute. The fog had burned off, though, and the temperature felt almost pleasant.

She got in the waiting car and they returned to the city. When they passed the checkpoint, she leaned forward and said to the driver, "I think I'll walk from here."

"My orders were to drive you," the driver said.

"Well, I'm giving you new orders." She opened the door. "Take the afternoon off."

"I can't let you do that! What if something happens to you?"

"What could happen? No one's allowed into Port City unless they're cleared beforehand."

She stepped out. The driver glanced at the guards on the checkpoint as if seeking their assistance, but they said nothing and he shrugged and pulled away.

She wanted—needed—the walk for several reasons. She had to be alone, to clear her head after the strange sights and smells of the hearth. And she wanted to see Port City up close, so that she could talk about it with Go-Between, show him the benefits that SpaceAdmin could bring to his planet.

She could have explained all this to the driver, of course. "Never explain," her father used to say. "Your subordinates don't need to know, and your superiors will ask if they don't understand."

She had thought about her father a great deal since she came to Malku and Port City. "If someone disobeys an order, you make an example of him immediately," he had said. "No one will disobey you after that." And she had; she had fired the adjutant. She wondered if he would have approved.

Her father had died three years ago, before she received her promotion to ambassador. Since then, the things he had taught her seemed more important than ever; she found herself remembering them at odd times, relying on them to find her way through the complex maze of interplanetary diplomacy. After all, he had negotiated the Peace of Altair, single-handedly ending a war that had cost millions of lives and nearly destroyed an entire planet. Would anything she did ever match that?

She sighed; she missed him very much. She wished she could tell him about her new posting. So much rested on her shoulders. Would he be proud of her?

She passed ugly gray buildings, groups of soldiers in uniform, dockworkers getting off their shift. A noisy crowd came out of a tavern, laughing and shouting. Streetlights glowed every dozen yards or so, casting a little light before the gloom closed in again.

She saw a few Hwaru, not very many. Once, she saw a male part his robe and relieve himself against the corner of a building; she had heard about this in the briefings but she still felt a shudder of disgust to see it. Another example of Delgado's "lack of separation between public and private spheres," probably. The urine left a dark stain against the concrete.

The buildings thinned and she began to pass clusters of trees like the ones she had seen that morning. Their right-angle branches, turning left and right, up and down, made them look like intricate puzzles. They smelled like pencil shavings, that same odor of wood and graphite combined.

Far off, she saw the lights of a ship as it lifted into the air; a loud rumbling

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came to where she stood a moment later. She hurried home, eager to write up her notes and impressions.

A few days later, she arrived at the hearth to find everything in chaos—children crying, adults racing back and forth, dogs barking. Delgado sat in his customary chair, looking as if he would rather be anywhere else. Of all the people from the base, only he continued to attend the talks; he needed to be there to study the Hwaru, and to explain some of the nuances of their behavior if Majli failed to understand anything.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"A child is sick," Go-Between said.

Now she realized that only one child was crying, though it made enough noise for a whole roomful of them. It was bedded down by one of the fires; an adult held a clay cup to its mouth, trying to make it drink. A dog, fluffy and golden as a chrysanthemum, lay on the bed with the child and whined anxiously.

"I can send a doctor from the hospital," she said. "They might be able to find out what's wrong."

One of the long nerve-wracking silences passed. "We would like that very much," Go-Between said finally. "There is suspicion, you know—some people think that you brought the disease."

"That I—"

"Your people. Though the disease existed for a few years before you arrived. I am sorry to say that there is some distrust of you."

"Oh, no," she said, appalled. "We would never do anything like that.I assure you that you can trust us."

Delgado's head jerked toward her; she could not make out his expression in the dim smoky light.

"I hope we can put to rest all your suspicion," she said into the silence. "We are here to help you."

"That's the first time I've heard you lie," Delgado said. Their briefings after the negotiations had evolved into something more informal, dinner or coffee at the embassy cafeteria. And Delgado himself seemed more at ease with her, less inclined to launch into a lecture on any pretext.

"Lie? What do you mean?" She poured coffee from the urn and headed toward a free table. He got his own cup and followed.

"When you said we would never intentionally bring disease." He sat. "Earth's history is full of examples where we did just that. People gave blankets infected with smallpox to Native Americans, for example."

"Oh, but that was a long time ago! I remember that story now, but I certainly wasn't thinking of it during the negotiations."

Delgado looked at her silently, his full lips curled up in a smile.

"Look," she said. "I'm not here to fill the Hwaru in on every terrible thing we've done throughout our history. I have to put the best face on things. My father used to say, 'An ambassador is an honest man sent to lie abroad for the good of his country.' He was quoting someone, I don't remember who—"

"I've heard of your father. He negotiated the Peace of Altair, didn't he?"

She smiled wryly. "Everyone's heard of him."

"How old were you then?"

"About five. I don't remember much, just sitting on the floor and playing with my glow-gun while my father had long conversations with something that looked like a giant green lobster."

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"So you were there at the talks themselves?"

"Oh, yeah. My father wanted me to learn everything I could, for when I joined SpaceAdmin myself. I remember that I was under strict orders not to point my gun at the lobster and make him glow."

"Did you go with him on every posting, then?"

"Sure. That was my whole childhood, moving from planet to planet, going wherever my father was needed. My mother couldn't take it—she finally left us and went back to Earth. What about you? Where did you grow up?"

"Merida, in Mexico. I never went anywhere, just stayed in the same town until I left for college."

She shook her head. "I can't imagine that. What was it like? Did you have a big family?"

"Huge. Aunts and uncles and brothers and sisters and cousins and dogs—"

"You had dogs?"

"Lots. Why?"

"Well, I'm wondering about the dogs here. I still can't get over it. I mean, wouldn't the Hwaru, well, *look* wrong to the dogs somehow?"

"Smell wrong, more likely. Dogs rely on smell more than any other sense."

"You sound like you've been researching this."

"I have been, yes. The thing about dogs—they're pack animals. They're happiest when they're in a group, and when they know what everyone's place is in that group. Someone has to be the pack leader, the alpha dog, and if you want your dog to obey you, that has to be you, the owner. It doesn't bother them that their pack includes another species. I never thought about it when I was a kid, but it's amazing, really, that it doesn't, that they're so open to animals that act and smell different from them, that aren't dogs. They're the opposite of bigoted. There are stories of gorillas in captivity keeping dogs as pets, and race horses that won't run if their dogs aren't there. Dogs seem to accept *any* species joining the pack, anyone that has the presence to become pack leader. Even aliens, apparently."

"Yes, but humans grew up with dogs. We evolved with them. So did gorillas and horses, for that matter. You said it yourself—anyone not from Earth would smell wrong. Have dogs ever accepted any other alien species?"

"There's no record of it happening. But it does make a sort of sense that they would. If they can join other non-dog species, why not aliens?" He finished his coffee and grinned at her. "There's a paper to be written here."

The negotiations went on. She met with Go-Between nearly every day, with time off for the Hwaru's holidays. (She, of course, had no holidays.) She talked about the technology the humans could give the Hwaru, the medical advances that could be theirs as soon as scientists had a chance to study Hwaru biology, the knowledge the two cultures could exchange.

The negotiations moved slowly; in the maddening silences between conversation, time seemed to crawl, almost stop altogether. Sometimes, she sensed resistance from Go-Between, but she told herself that she was imagining it, that it was only a function of the slow pace of the talks.

She wondered once or twice what would happen if she did not succeed, if the Hwaru did not agree to the port expansion. Her upward climb in SpaceAdmin would come to an abrupt end; she would be sent to some backwater planet with no chance for advancement. "Never think about failure," her father used to say. "Keep your goal ahead of you at all times."

She took to wandering Port City whenever she had a spare moment, try-

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ing to become familiar with every corner and crevice, looking for any possible advantage in the talks. And she could not help but be fascinated by the city: the sweet lingering odor, strongest in the Hwaru hearth but present everywhere, the beautiful colors of the leaves, the tall angular males and the round fat females, headed on unguessable errands of their own. They walked so gracefully, as if in a stately procession. And what did the females do? She would have to ask Delgado.

One afternoon, she heard a commotion up ahead, and strained to see in the murky light. A group of soldiers were laughing and shouting. "Hey, Sheepface!" one of them called.

"Baaa! Baaa!"

"Hey, Shitface! Look at us when we're talking to you!"

The soldiers had surrounded a Hwaru male and were backing him against a wall; she could see his dark muzzle looming above the crowd. "Stop that!" she said, hurrying forward. "Stop it right now!"

"Don't let the dog escape!" one of the soldiers said. "Here, doggie!"

A dog? Oh, God, it wasn't Go-Between, was it? She broke into a run.

"Sheep shouldn't have dogs!"

"It's a sheepdog!"

Harsh laughter rose up at this. She ran faster. She sensed other people hurrying after her but she had no time to stop.

"Baaa, baaa, black sheep!" someone said.

"Get away from him," she called, breathing hard. No one paid her any attention. Louder, she said, "Right *now.* That's an *order,* soldiers!"

Some of the men turned away from the Hwaru and looked at her, befuddled. They were drunk, she saw. Anger filled her. She would discharge their sorry asses and get them off-planet before they had a chance to sober up.

Other men closed in around the Hwaru. She heard a dog yelp. Suddenly, she realized where she was, a lone woman in a crowd of hostile, raucous men, all of them armed, most too drunk to understand the damage she could do to their careers.

Then Hwaru surrounded her on all sides, a dozen of them, maybe more, males and females. And more dogs, dogs swarming between the legs of the Hwaru, barking urgently, growling, baring their teeth at the soldiers.

The soldiers slowly became aware of the crowd around them. They stopped and backed away, then ran off into the dark. Should she tell them to stay? "Never give an order you know won't be obeyed," her father had said. She let them go.

A dog whimpered. A Hwaru male bent over it. His scent was very strong, something like burning metal. Oh, God, it *was* Go-Between. He would never deal with her after this; the negotiations had failed. "Go-Between?" she said.

"Yes?" said a voice behind her.

She turned quickly. A tall Hwaru stood there. She recognized the gems glimmering at his neck and wrists and flushed with embarrassment. She couldn't even tell one Hwaru from another; she was screwing up in all kinds of ways today. "I want to assure you that this will never happen again," she said to Go-Between. "These men will be disciplined."

"Let's not worry about that for the moment," Go-Between said in his loud voice. "We need to get the dog back to the hearth."

The other Hwaru—the dog's owner—moved aside, and now she could see that the dog looked nothing like Fido; it had short brown fur, pointed ears, and a strange crooked tail. It lay on its side, panting heavily.

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The headlights of an embassy car cut through the gloom. Thank God, she might still be able to salvage something from this situation. She waved it down. It came to a stop and two soldiers got out.

"We need to get to the hearth, fast," she said to them. "This Hwaru here and the dog, who's injured, and Go-Between and I."

The two men responded quickly to the emergency. One of them took off his coat and maneuvered the dog onto it; the dog whimpered quietly. The other opened the car door and helped lift the makeshift bed onto the backseat. The two Hwaru got in with the dog; Majli crowded in with the soldiers in the front.

"I'm very sorry this happened," she said, twisting in her seat to look at the Hwaru. The car turned around and headed toward the checkpoint. "And I'm sorry I didn't recognize you, but it was dark. . . ."

Never apologize unless you absolutely have to, her father had said. What would he think of her behavior today? But she was in the wrong, she and the people under her command. Surely he would understand that.

"I am not offended," Go-Between said. "It is very hard for us to distinguish you humans by sight, one from another. You all look alike to us, even your males and females the same."

She nearly grinned at hearing the ancient cliché come from Go-Between's strange muzzle. But she had to concentrate, had to save something from this debacle. Amazingly, Go-Between and the other Hwaru did not seem angry. Perhaps they had misunderstood, perhaps they had taken the soldiers' hostility for high spirits. The other Hwaru did not look hurt, thank God.

"This is Hiraz, one of our hearth," Go-Between said, indicating the other Hwaru. "Hiraz, this is Ambassador Majli Iris."

"I am very pleased to meet you," Majli said. She searched for a neutral topic. "Why do you like dogs so much?"

"Dogs?" Go-Between's muzzle opened; she knew by now that that meant he was smiling. "Dogs are amazing animals. They are so happy, they live in the moment. Look at this one—" He nodded to the dog on the seat next to him, its eyes closed, its breathing regular now. "He's asleep. After everything that happened, he's asleep. They are so uncomplicated. It is good to be uncomplicated, sometimes."

His eyes met hers. For the first time in their negotiations, they shared a moment of pure communication; she knew exactly what he was thinking. He was telling her that the two of them were doing a complicated dance, that he understood all the reasons why the dance had to continue, but that he regretted the necessity for it all the same.

She nodded. She regretted it too, sometimes. Once or twice during the talks she had wondered what would happen if she simply said, "Okay. You have the land—we want it. Yes or no?"

Go-Between ran his hand lightly over the dog's flank. "He seems not to be hurt, merely frightened. But look—" He indicated the dog's crooked tail, then gently parted the fur on its side to show her an ugly scar, a long pale gash. "He was injured badly once. I wonder what happened. Well, there's no way of telling now."

"Maybe a car accident?" she suggested.

The car pulled up to the checkpoint and the guards waved them through. She faced forward, needing to hold on to the door handle as they jounced along the rutted roads.

When they arrived at the hearth, the soldiers jumped out and opened the

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doors, then lifted the dog between them and carried it inside. In the main room, the familiar confusion swirled around them, children yelling and growling, dogs playing, someone calling across the room, someone else hurrying through with a platter of food.

A dog separated from the pack and ran up to them, tail wagging wildly. It was Fido, she saw, thrilled that her owner had come home. "How can you not like dogs?" Go-Between said, smiling.

He turned to the soldiers. "Put the dog down over here," he said, indicating a spot by the fire. The soldiers settled it gently on a pile of blankets. Fido padded toward the blankets, ears down, legs stiff, hackles raised, prepared to fight this interloper in her spot. Then, suddenly, she backed away and returned to the pack. Once again, Majli was amazed at how well-behaved the dog was.

The other dog opened its eyes and then, to Majli's surprise, wagged its misshapen tail feebly, clearly happy to be home and safe and warm. "You can communicate with dogs," someone said behind her.

Majli turned. Hiraz stood behind her. "You asked why we like dogs," he said. His accent was stronger than Go-Between's; the words came from deeper within his muzzle and sounded close to a growl. "It is partly because you can communicate with them."

Go-Between looked at Hiraz quickly, a complex expression that Majli couldn't interpret. "You can communicate with cats, too, probably," Hiraz said. "But they seem not to want to."

"Thank you for all your help," Go-Between said. "We can take care of everything from here."

Should she ask whether the talks would continue after this? No, best to act as if nothing had changed. "I'll see you tomorrow, then."

"Tomorrow," Go-Between said.

She breathed a sigh of relief and headed back to the car.

A few days later, the base commander reported that Hiraz had identified one of the soldiers who had surrounded him, and that, acting on Hiraz's information, they had arrested Private Tully Walter. "He says he didn't do it, though," the commander said. "And we can't hold him much longer—we'll have to let him go if there's no evidence."

Majli arranged for an interview with Walter at the stockade. The interview room consisted of a table and several chairs. She took one facing the soldier. A guard sat between them.

"What exactly was the idea of attacking one of the Hwaru?" she asked with no preliminaries.

"I didn't do anything," Walter said. "I wasn't even there."

"That's not what our informant says. We have a witness who puts you right at the scene."

"A witness? Who?"

A Hwaru, Majli thought. Suddenly she remembered Go-Between saying, "You all look alike to us," and she wondered exactly how Hiraz had identified this man.

She forced the thought aside; she could not afford to let her doubt show. "Look," she said, leaning forward. "These talks are critical. SpaceAdmin needs this port. If someone interferes with the negotiations here—and that includes harassing the Hwaru, giving them the idea we won't make good neighbors—well, that could be grounds for court martial."

Walter went very pale. "I didn't do it," he said. "I never touched him."

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"Who *did* touch him?" Majli asked softly. "Give me a name, and I'll see that you get off fairly lightly."

"A guy named San Corio," Walter said reluctantly. "It was his idea. He saw the Sh—the Hwaru, walking all by himself, just him and the dog, and he said—well, the dog made him angry. I mean, they're *our* dogs."

"And then what happened?"

"Well, then he started yelling. He said that—excuse me, but he said that sheep shouldn't own dogs. He said it was up to us to rescue it. We didn't mean to hurt him, we just wanted to get the dog back. And then it all got out of control. I didn't touch him, though, I swear. I was at the back. I may have yelled a few things, but I never touched him."

"All right. We'll talk to Corio, see what he has to say."

"What about me? What's going to happen to me now?"

"I can't promise anything. It depends on whether you were telling me the truth. You'll be discharged, of course, and sent off-planet, but that might be the worst of it. The discharge might not even be dishonorable."

Walter seemed to relax a little. She stood and nodded to the guard to unlock the interview room, then headed for home.

She thought that she knew now how Hiraz had identified Walter: his dog had sniffed him out. Thank God they had the right person, and that the people responsible would be punished, just as she had promised Go-Between.

She hated to admit it, though, but she understood how Walter felt. "Dammit," she thought, "they are our dogs!"

In the days that followed, Walter came forward with the names of others in the crowd, and they and San Corio were arrested. Corio denied everything at first, but when several people identified him as the instigator, he broke down and confessed.

Meanwhile, the talks dragged on. One day, during a particularly long pause, a dog came over and sniffed at her hands. It was Hiraz's dog; she recognized the crooked tail and sharp pointed ears. She patted him carefully. "I'm glad to see he's well enough to go outside," she said.

"He's not well at all, I'm sorry to say," Go-Between said. "He turned out to have suffered several broken ribs."

"You mean he hasn't left the hearth?"

"Not since that night."

"But—" Majli hesitated. "Think twice about everything you say," her father had said. "Then think once more."

The hell with that. She shut her father out. There was something strange here, something these people were hiding from her, and she had to get to the bottom of it. She could no longer afford diplomacy.

"How did Hiraz recognize the person in the crowd that night?" she asked bluntly. "I thought the dog recognized his smell, but you said the dog hasn't been out. And we all look alike to you; you said that too."

Go-Between was silent for a long moment. "There are things we do not tell you," he said finally. "Just as I am certain there are things you do not tell us."

The dog lowered his nose to her shoes, apparently finding a fascinating scent there. Suddenly, a good many puzzles came together. The long silences, and the friendship with dogs, and the fact that King Darhu never spoke. . . .

"Hiraz recognized Walter by *smell*," she said. "You communicate by smell, don't you? You translate what I say for the king, and he answers you, all by scent. That's why you talk so loudly—because normally, when you're close

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to each other, you don't use your voice at all. Speech is only for long distances, isn't that right?" She didn't wait for an answer. "I thought *you* were the power here, but you're only the translator."

"The Go-Between. We have never lied to you."

"And dogs—they communicate by smell too," she said, thinking quickly. God, it was worse than she'd thought; the implications were devastating. "You—somehow you can talk to dogs, actually *speak* to them. Hiraz even told me so, but I didn't listen. That's why the dogs here are so well-behaved."

Delgado took out his notebook and stylus and began to write furiously. *Great,* she thought, *he's going to get a paper out of this. I'm going to be posted to some backwater, and he's going to be famous!* She shook her head; she had to concentrate.

"Is that true?" Delgado asked. "Do dogs have language? How much can they communicate?"

"More than you suspect," Go-Between said.

"But what do they talk about? Can they understand abstract concepts?"

"Enough of this," Majli said, snapping at Delgado. "You can interview him later." She turned to Go-Between. "You said—you said that there was no way of knowing now how Hiraz's dog got injured. The important word was 'now,' and I missed it. What you meant was, you'd ask him when he woke up. Isn't that right? And what did he tell you? How was he hurt?"

"A car accident. As you thought."

"And the broken ribs?" She held her breath.

"A man in the crowd kicked him. Kicked him several times."

She slumped. "And so you know—"

"Know what?" Go-Between said. His muzzle opened; he was smiling, though she could not imagine what he found so amusing.

"Know that we are not the way we represented ourselves," Majli said. "That we are crueler than you thought."

Delgado gave her a warning look. She shook her head. There was nothing she could salvage from this situation; she might as well tell the truth. She stood, ready to leave if Go-Between dismissed her.

"Sit down, please," Go-Between said. He said nothing for a long moment; she thought she might scream from the tension, then realized that he and the king were communicating, just as she had guessed. The spicy scent around her grew stronger.

"On the contrary," Go-Between said finally. "We would like to accept your offer and lease the port to you. We are eager to share all the learning you have promised us."

"You—you are? But *why?*"

"The dogs told us. They said that you could be cruel, yes, but that you were rarely so. They said that they have loved you for years uncountable. That you are good, and worthy of our trust."

She grabbed an armful of her clothes from the closet and thrust them into her suitcase, the hangers still attached. A knock came at her door. She didn't answer.

"Hello?" someone said. Delgado stepped inside. "My God, what are you doing? Are you leaving?"

She faced him, still feeling the anger that had driven her to start packing. "Do you know how my father negotiated the Peace of Altair?"

Delgado said nothing.

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"He did it by lying to them. Over and over, until he came up with lies each side wanted to hear. Beautiful lies, all of them. Beautiful, worthless lies."

"Are you drunk?"

"No. No, I'm fine."

"Listen, you wouldn't believe what I'm learning about dogs! This is amazing. Do you know why they wag their tails? It's to spread their scent around—it's like shouting. And when they're frightened and they tuck their tails beneath them—that's to make sure that no one can smell them out, can hear them, if you like, and find them."

Majli plucked the hangers from her clothes. "That's nice."

"And when they urinate, that's like writing. They can pack enormous amounts of meaning into it. Go-Between says it's almost like epic poetry, one vast poem that every dog adds to. All this communication going on around us, and we never knew."

Majli said nothing.

"What's wrong?" Delgado asked. "*Are* you leaving?"

"Yes."

"But why? You did a great job here. You got us the port. Sure, you went a little crazy toward the end there, told them that stuff about us being cruel, but no one back at SpaceAdmin has to know that. I won't mention it in my report, if that's what's worrying you."

"What's wrong is that we're misrepresenting ourselves to the Hwaru. The dogs told them that we're wonderful people. Well, dogs are saps, you know that! You can kick them and kick them and they still come back, they still love you. Dogs don't know anything!"

She turned toward him. "We're *not* wonderful. Look at those soldiers, ready to riot just because they saw a Hwaru with a dog. And here I was, trying to pretend we were something else, kind, generous people who wouldn't hurt a flea. Wouldn't hurt a dog. I was lying, just like you said. All I thought about was getting that port, was winning. It never occurred to me that if we won, the Hwaru might lose. We haven't changed—we'll never change. We're still the same people who gave the Native Americans those blankets."

"Well, but we're trying. We're more careful now. That's what I'm here for, that's why they send anthropologists to these talks. To make sure we understand who we're dealing with, that we don't screw it up this time."

"And we won't? Can you promise me that? We're going to have thousands of people coming here to work on the port. Can you promise me the Hwaru won't be attacked again?"

"No, of course not. Of course not. But—"

"All my life, I wanted to be an ambassador. *Thought* I wanted to be an ambassador. But it was just my father, pushing me and pushing me. You know, there was a part of me that was glad when he died. Glad I wouldn't have to hear any of those stupid homilies again. I didn't know that I'd be hearing them for the rest of my life, that I'd never get rid of them. That they'd play on an infinite loop in my brain."

"You *are* drunk."

"Maybe. Maybe a little. But I'm not changing my mind. I'm quitting. I can't go on telling these—these lies about us to everyone we meet. You didn't see those soldiers, that mob, when they attacked Hiraz. It was horrible. *We're* horrible."

"Maybe," Delgado said. "But you know, the *dogs* like us. That's got to count for something." ○

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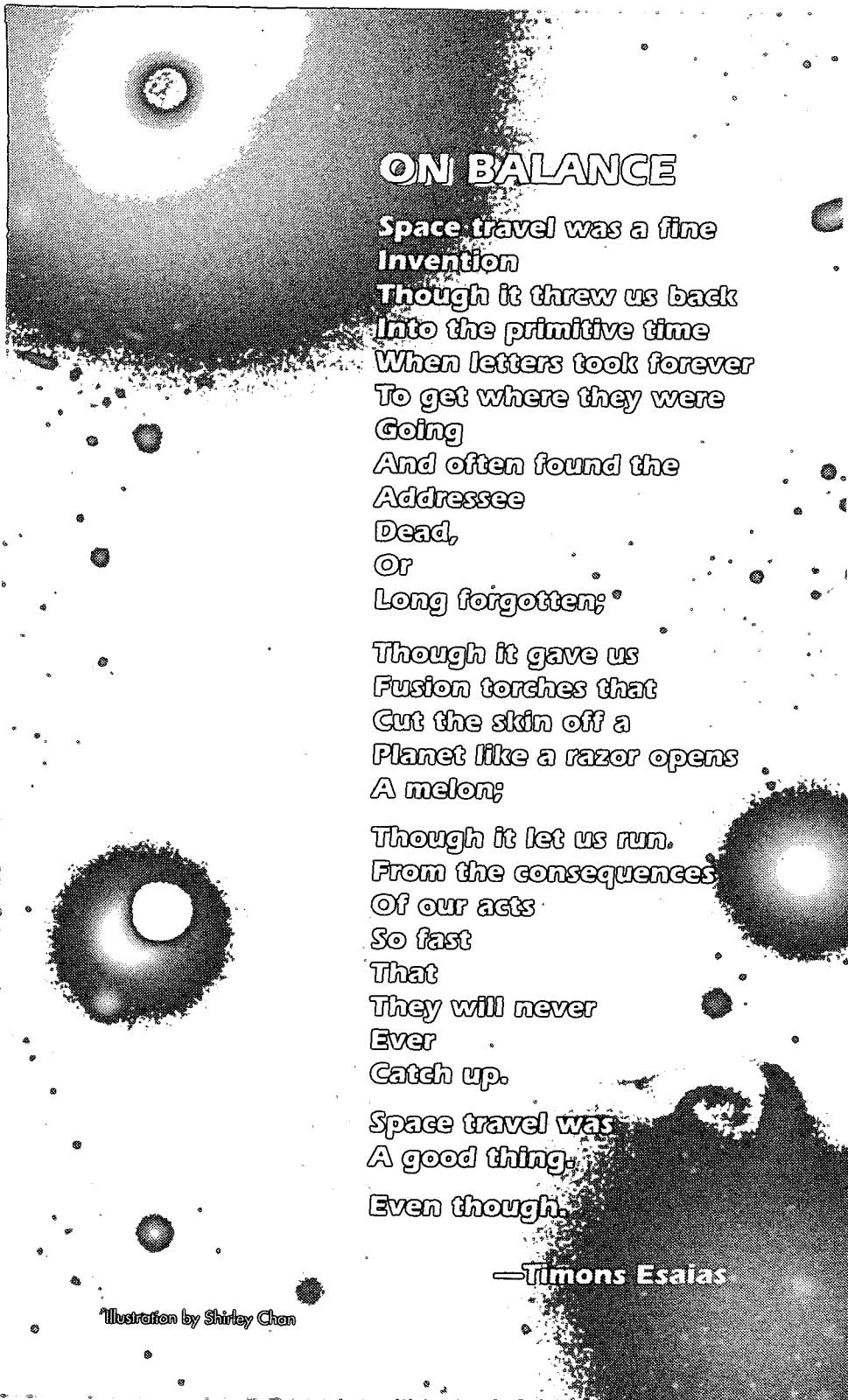

ON BALANCE

Space travel was a fine
Invention
Though it threw us back
Into the primitive time
When letters took forever
To get where they were
Going
And often found the
Addressee
Dead,
Or
Long forgotten;

Though it gave us
Fusion torches that
Cut the skin off a
Planet like a razor opens
A melon;

Though it let us run.
From the consequences
Of our acts
So fast
That
They will never
Ever
Catch up.

Space travel was
A good thing.

Even though.

—Timons Esaias

*Illustration by Shirley Chan

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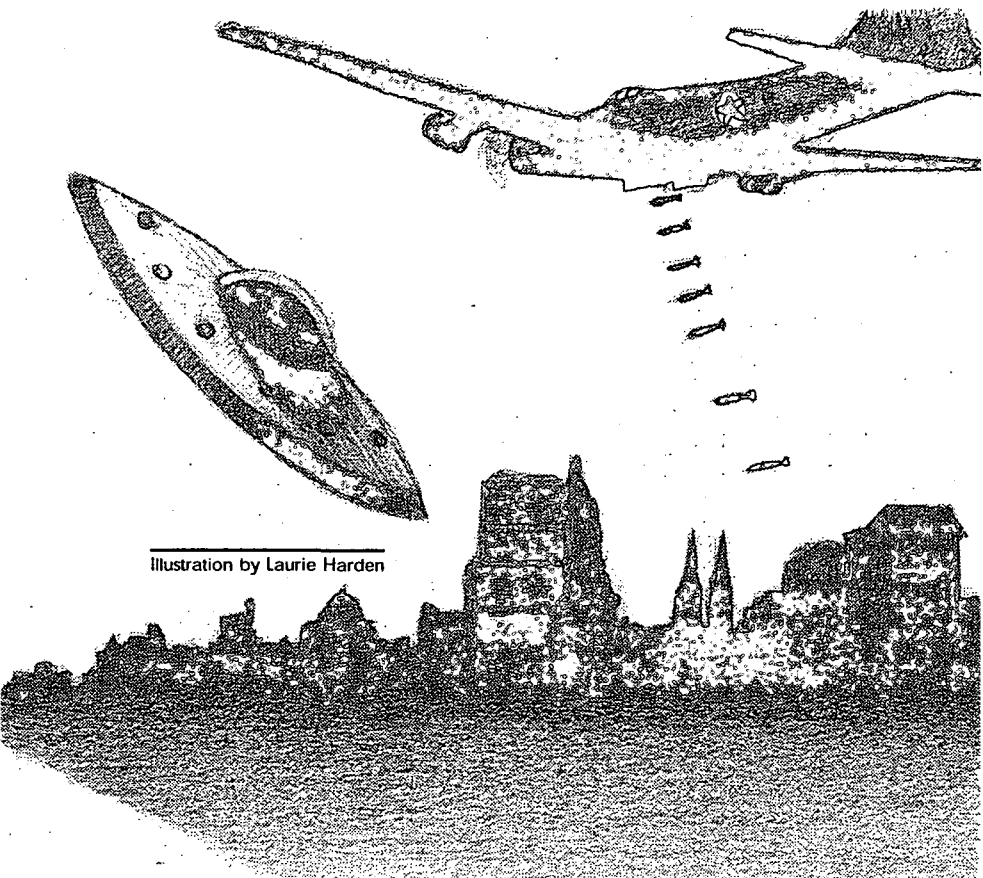

Illustration by Laurie Harden

SHADY LADY

R. Garcia y Robertson

The trade paperback edition of R. Garcia y Robertson's novel, *American Woman*, has just been published by Tor, and another, as yet untitled, book is due out soon. Mr. Garcia is currently working on a trilogy that deals with the War of the Roses. He moves a little closer to our own time period with his rollicking new tale about the fly-boys of WWII.

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In the Mood (original title: Hot and Anxious)

She rode a big clunky black English bike, built from old battleship spares—one forward gear, no reverse, brake with your feet. The front wheel wobbled at every fork and turning. The young woman did not mind. Long-limbed and athletic, she delighted in clanking along, following the crooked strip of blue above the tree-lined lane, admiring lush orchards and thatched cottages with whitewashed walls. Blonde hair bounced in the breeze. She smelled apple trees ahead.

A drone at her back grew to a rumble, shaking the air, sounding like a motorized convoy coming up fast. Instinct pulled her hard over into the ditch. Skidding to a stop, she nearly slammed into an old man on the bank cutting brush in freshly pressed trousers and a tweed coat.

England was not the woman's home. She was a foreigner, subject to special wartime scrutiny. And at home things were worse—far worse. Her papers were good. Really first rate. Only her name and some of the signatures were forged. But she had suffered too many close calls at checkpoints; official vehicles, staff cars, truckloads of soldiers, and armored columns got her instant respect.

Dragging her bike clear of the road, she glanced over her shoulder. The roar of engines rose to deafen her, but the road was empty. No trucks. No convoy. Not so much as a motor bike.

Looking up, she saw a tremendous four-engined bomber barreling down the lane, trailing smoke from one wing, its propwash whipping the treetops. Bullet holes pocked the huge aircraft, and great gashes torn by cannon shells. In places she could see right through the bomber to the blue sky beyond. Broad white stars shone on the one wing and the silver fuselage.

As the plane roared by, the ball-turret in the ship's belly rotated, training twin machine guns on her. Black holes stared at her from the end of each barrel. Another heavy machine gun poked out of a waist position. The man holding it blew her a kiss. Alongside the shattered glass in the nose, she saw the picture of a black-haired woman in red underwear draped above neat white lettering—"SHADY LADY V."

One wing came down as the great warplane weaved with the lane, keeping her in sight. Then it was gone, flashing past the trees, dragging a torrent of air behind it. As the noisy cyclone subsided, she looked over at the old gentleman. His pressed pants and tweed suit seemed an odd outfit for pruning ditches. Without bothering to look up, the overdressed gardener leaned on his clippers and muttered, "Bloody Yanks, think they own the place."

Still holding tight to her bike's handlebars, the woman wondered what it would be like to fly a plane like that, hurtling through the sky in a tremendous mass of metal. She knew, of course, that she would never fly that particular plane. She knew it even before she heard the bells of the crash trucks, and saw the pillar of smoke rising above the apple trees.

Shady Lady V came rattling in at treetop level, fighting a stiff crosswind, firing green flares to say she had wounded aboard. Crabbing sideways, her upwind wing dipping dangerously, the Flying Fortress was close to falling out of the sky. Captain Valentine struggled to make the end of the runway. Seeing the left wing wheel go down, he shouted, "Down left." LeForge responded with, "Down right." Over the intercom, the ball-turret gunner re-

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ported the tailwheel down, then scrambled to relative safety in the waist. Ready or not, runway rushed up at them.

By the book, "a good or bad landing by a B-17 is usually determined by the time the plane descends to 300 feet, by which time the pilot should have established constant glide, constant airspeed, constant rate of descent, and accurate landing distance." Valentine already knew this would be a bad landing. *Shady Lady* had been under 300 feet ever since crossing the English coast—but there was no way to reshoot this approach.

With his navigator wounded, all Valentine had to home in on was the cool female accents of Flight Control. "Sigh now, Yank, here's your hi-ding. Don't worriee. We'll get you home." Brit voices could sound so beautiful even on the radio.

Chief Chisholm stood braced between the seats, knuckles white, reading off the airspeed, "115 . . . 110 . . . 105 . . ."

With one engine gone, and another running wild, reducing airspeed was easy. "100 . . . 95 . . . 90 . . ." Valentine pulled the throttles full back. LeForge leaped to set the props to maximum. Engines coughed to a stop. There was a moment of feathery silence, then screeching wind and banging airframe filled the void left by the engines.

Runway flashed below. With a thump and bang, *Shady Lady* touched, bounced, then slammed hard onto the tarmac. Valentine ceased to be a pilot. *Shady Lady* was no longer an airplane, obeying yoke and rudder, instead becoming a twenty-ton toboggan screaming down the tarmac, headed for the turnip field at the far end.

Valentine sang out, "Hydraulic gone." LeForge slaved like a fiend at the hand pump. Feeling the right wheel go, Valentine braced himself, taking a moment to inform the crew, "Grab your asses, we're going in." The damaged right wing caught the runway, swinging the hurtling plane around. The wing buckled. Then exploded. *Shady Lady* skidded sideways, spewing flames.

Blinded by smoke, Valentine tore at the buckles binding him to the shuddering seat. Crash routine dictated that the aircraft commander be the last out, behind his copilot and engineer. The plane banged to a stop. Valentine felt the right-hand seat. LeForge was gone. He scrambled into the empty nose, dropping through the forward hatch. Pavement hit hard, nearly knocking him down. Roaring hot air beat at him, smelling of burning gasoline. Crash wagons clanged his way.

Ducking beneath the stinging smoke, Valentine cleared his eyes, counting legs and lower bodies. Silverman, Chisholm, and all four gunners were out and clear. LeForge was helping the bombardier drag the wounded navigator away from the burning plane. Ten men out. Crash completed. He could call it a day.

Valentine helped load Lieutenant Grant aboard an ambulance, holding his navigator's good hand down. The cannon shell that crashed through the nose had riddled Grant's left side. Bits of glass tore Grant's skin whenever he rubbed at his face.

Cheerful women met them at the Red Cross truck, offering cognac and coffee. Five Star Hennessy, not in shot glasses, but in big two and a half ounce tumblers. "How about donuts or a sandwich?" With three thousand men in the group and so few women, the Red Cross crew stood out, looking so young and worshipful, always happy to have you home. A grinning brunette handed Chief Chisholm a pack of Luckys. Shaking, he tore it open,

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spilling two out onto the tarmac, and tried to light a third. She had to light it for him.

These helpful young women made Valentine acutely aware that he stank of sweat and soot, and that somewhere this side of Cologne, he had pissed his pants. His crew stood around downing brandy without a grimace or shudder, like water on a hot day. Clinging to his glass, he worked to put the latest in a long string of bad landings behind him, fixing his thoughts on the woman he had seen coming in. The one on the bike. Did she live near the base? Valentine hoped so.

Debriefing was in an overgrown Nissen hut with long tables. Crewmen sat hunched over brandy and donuts, eyes ringed with fatigue, facing down an intelligence officer, bitching about the mission. "Bad. Miserable. The worst. We nearly got *killed*."

The IO tried to categorize the complaints. "What about flak over the target?"

"Not bad. Could have been worse." The IO noted times and map positions. Valentine kept his mind on the woman, wanting to bike over and see if she was still there.

"What about the new GB-1s?"

"Fuck, what a brilliant farce! It was all that bomb's fault. That goddamned bomb nearly got us *killed*."

Valentine had been hoarding his anger for just this moment. He hated the "guided" bombs they had tested. Everybody did. "They are useless. I doubt one of them hit the target. Ours sure as hell didn't."

Bader, the bombardier, heaved a hearty, "Amen." The GB-1s were supposed to be a thinking weapon. "Smart" bombs with internal brains to take them to the target. Valentine had wracked up a Fort, and had a navigator likely to lose an arm or a leg, all because of these overeducated bombs.

He told the IO, "When we made the drop, the right wing bomb hung up." The idiot bomb had a college degree but not enough sense to drop. "As soon as the left bomb separated, the ship flipped over on her side. We were dragged straight down through the formation in a screaming spin, with a ton of glider bomb hanging from our left wing. It's a first-rate miracle that we didn't hit anyone." Valentine had hugged the control yoke, sobbing Hail Marys, a misspent life flashing before his eyes.

"Just as we were about to auger in, the spin tore that dumb sucker loose. I think we bombed a cow pasture somewhere short of Cologne." He could not give the IO an exact location.

"Not that the first one did any better," Bader declared. "Goddamn glider bombs were falling all around Cologne. Hitting fields and haystacks. Falling into the Rhine. Killing *fish*." Being a weekend fisherman, Bader keenly felt the loss.

The IO did not look up. All he said was, "Fighters?"

"Not a one," Valentine replied, "until we fell sideways out of the box. As soon as we wrestled the ship out of her spin, a pair of Me 109s plowed head on into us. A *rotte* that really knew its business. Blew the nose off the ship. Hit Lieutenant Grant, and shot out our starboard engines."

The IO asked if the fighters had distinguishing marks.

"Big black crosses."

"And itty bitty swastikas on the tail."

The IO sighed, "Did you get a shot at them?"

"Sheepdip got a shot into one. Didn't you, Sheepdip?" The IO looked over at the waist gunner. "Want to claim a probable?"

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Sheepdip shrugged.

Still thinking about the blonde, Valentine tried to finish up quickly. With an engine out, and another windmilling, they'd had to *autobahn* home. He traced the wounded bomber's route out of Germany, across Occupied France and the low countries—with civilians waving to them, while German troops took potshots.

When he got to the landing, LeForge cut in. "Damn it, you scared the shit out of me! We were under a hundred feet, almost home, hanging on two engines, and the Captain decides to go skirt-chasing. Checking out some woman on a bike."

"A blonde," added the ball-turret gunner.

"Right, a blonde on a bike."

The intelligence officer raised an eyebrow, not finding a place on the debriefing sheets for this. Valentine shrugged, "I was getting my bearings."

Crewmen laughed—but it was true; seeing her had leveled him out. No one backed up LeForge's complaint. The crew had to be thinking about that horrible gut-wrenching spin over Cologne, pinned to their positions by centrifugal force, terrified and helpless. Valentine had pulled them out. Did they want LeForge in the left-hand seat? "LeFrog" was one of the most mediocre co-pilots in the 8th Air Force, no mean accomplishment considering his competition. The Army had trouble enough training pilots, and just caved in when it came to co-pilots.

Valentine had wracked up four B-17s—all but one in the line of duty. Three crashed. And one literally fell apart on the runway after coming back from Berlin. But he always brought his crews home, so a bit of sightseeing was not so terrible. The IO made some cryptic notes, then let them walk.

As Valentine left the hut, smoke hung over the runway. A couple of pilots called out, "Hey, Valentine, back to plowing turnips? Bucking for farmer? Lucky there were no nurses aboard!" Giving them a middle-finger salute, he got on his bike, peddling past the dispersal area and the skeet range, out to where he could smell apple trees.

But the woman was gone. All Valentine found was a gruff gaffer in a tweed coat who would not answer his questions. One of those Brits who hated Americans. ("Only three things wrong with Yanks—they're overpaid, oversexed, and over 'ere.") If Valentine spent the rest of his life "over 'ere"—and he could die any day—he would never understand the English. How could the same people be so nice and so obnoxious?

He got three days stand down and a ticket to London—his reward for falling out of formation and wracking up a Fort. (Valentine would never understand the Army Air Corps either—but a pass to London always helped with the "overpaid and oversexed" part of his job.) London was an open city, with half the men gone and most of the women lonely. There were WRENs, WACs, and WAAFs, in and out of uniform. And bored wives whose husbands were in Italy, or Burma, or wherever the war was playing. Also a lot of newmade widows not yet used to sleeping alone. Plus Piccadilly Commandos, and the "Free" French battalion on Bond Street, if you liked Lend-Lease love. Some fliers, desperate to survive their tours, became chaste and godfearing, toting family Bibles into the cockpit. Valentine never saw the advantage. Who would want to die with nothing on their conscience?

When he got back, a new navigator and a new plane were waiting. The navigator was Lieutenant Newbury, a Texan fresh from the States—instantly dubbed "Newboy." Four weeks ago, the closest he had ever been to

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Germany was a weekend bender in Amarillo. But he thought he could find Hamburg if he had to—"two times otta three anyway." His big problem was always being called "Yank."

Newboy was a godsend compared to the plane. The "new" Fort was an ancient B-17F with splotchy brown-and-drab camouflage, oil-stained engines, and no chin turret, just machine guns sticking out the nose at odd angles. *Chattanooga Choo Choo* was scrawled beneath unarmored cockpit windows. Sheepdip took one look and went AWOL. Valentine told the remaining crew he had flown worse. "Lots worse." Which was true. Nine months ago the plane had been new, and Valentine had been at this business nearly two years—but he did go to bed thinking bad thoughts about *Chattanooga Choo Choo*.

At three A.M., they jerked him out of bed. "Breakfast in half an hour." For a moment in the cold and dark, he did not know where he was. Then he remembered everything, particularly how much he hated going to war in the middle of the night. On mission days, he ate in the big dog's mess with colonels and majors—that meant steak and eggs. He once asked Jack Dog about the menu in the enlisted men's mess. The teenage tail gunner grinned, "Food's so good the ground crews eat our shit." So all the condemned got a hearty meal.

Rows of sweating men in sweaters, leather jackets, and heavy fleece-lined overpants made the big briefing hut smell like a barn. The operations map was behind a curtain, to hide the line of black yarn marking their route. But you could tell by the height of the yarn reel where you were headed. Low down meant a short mission into France. Today the reel stood at the top of the map. Someone swore aloud, "Son-of-a-bitch, it's Germany!"

A wise-ass major got up and pulled back the curtain. Bad news. Merseburg-Luna. The wise-ass major ran on about how vital synthetic oil was to the Nazis. Then a ground hog got up and yakked about the weather. They had been to Merseburg in early May, and all Valentine could think about was how thick the fighters had been, coming in ten, twenty, even thirty abreast, tearing through the formations. Merseburg had been the mission that ended in the turnip field.

Trucks took them to the dispersal area. Sheepdip was still AWOL, so they had a new waist gunner, a guy named Morris. No one had made up a name for him yet, so he was just called Morris. A flier in a flight suit, Mae West, breathing mask, and dangling oxygen bladder looks like a moonman or a Martian. This truckload of Martians were all bitching about their last visit to Merseburg. About the swarm of Me 410s that jumped them *after the target.* Forty-some Forts did not make it back. Silverman shook his head. "Jesus. Can they really make us fly on Sunday?" An old joke. The crew's first mission was on Sunday, and "Hi-Ho" Silverman was the only Jew in the crew. For most of them, this return to Merseburg was lucky thirteen. But it was Newboy's first mission—and number twenty-seven for Morris. Valentine had fifty missions in the Pacific, and two twenty-five mission tours in Europe, before they upped the standard tour to thirty. Making this his 113th mission.

Chattanooga Choo Choo stood on her hardstand, surrounded by shadowy apple trees. Ground crew was still crawling over her. Bleary eyed from a night spent readying the ship, the crew chief tipped back his Bosox cap with a big white B for Boston on it. "She'll fly," he told Valentine.

"Damn shame," someone scoffed. They climbed aboard anyway, plugging

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themselves in, hooking up oxygen hoses, intercom lines, and electrical leads for their heated suits. At altitude, air, warmth, and human contact all came through the ship. Sitting in the left-hand seat, Valentine could hear Chief Chisholm swearing as he tried to fit his guns into the overhead turret. "Damn guns don't want to go." They weren't the only ones. Chisholm was called "Chief" because he used to be Valentine's crew chief, and because he was half Cherokee.

Valentine's unarmored window was dirty and pitted, and by now it was light enough to see oil streaks on the port inboard engine. Someone had taken out a lot of the armor plate. "I think she's been having trouble making altitude," explained the crew chief. Only the contents of the bomb bay cheered Valentine up. No smartass guided bombs. Just dumb and ugly five-hundred-pounders. Mechanics gave a last wave, "Hope the *Luftwaffe* sleeps late."

Controls felt mushy as they lumbered down the runway. Her tail lifted, but *Chattanooga Choo Choo* did not want to leave the ground. With three tons of bombs aboard, and thousands of gallons of fuel, this was no time for second thoughts; hesitation would kill them all. Valentine jammed the throttles forward, and pulled back on the yoke. The end of the runway rushed at him. LeForge looked petrified. Wheels lifted. She was airborne.

They rattled off into morning mist, trailing clouds of oily smoke. The intercom crackled with complaints. Newboy had trouble finding his heading. LeForge did not like the oil temperature. Jack Dog was cold—wind whipped through the gaping waist windows, and his heated suit was not heating. Morris said his air made him sick.

Valentine told everyone to pipe down. "Newboy. We aren't in Texas anymore. That's England out the window, start from there. The rest of you shut up until I get my heading."

Newboy found a heading, and Valentine caught up with the group over East Anglia. The group box was the bottommost in a giant vertical wedge of bombers three thousand feet tall. Feathers of fog gave way to thick dirty air, churned to a bumpy torrent by hundreds of heavy bombers. Everyone was having trouble making formation. No one collided, but no one missed by a lot. LeForge fought to keep up, but kept falling behind—even on high rpm and full superchargers—forcing Valentine to take over, jockeying the throttles, shoving his ship back in the slot, thinking about the long flight to Merseburg. And back. And the fighters. And his last crash.

East Anglia disappeared. The North Sea slid beneath them. Oil pressure dropped, and cylinder temperature rose. He could see Holland ahead. Black bursts of flak hung over the Zuider Zee. The lead groups were already into it. Morris moaned that he was *really* sick. LeForge had fallen out of formation again. Valentine told him to give her more rpm. But *Chattanooga Choo Choo* did not want to chug. He could feel her falling back.

"Screw this." Valentine swung the ship around. "We're going home." By which he meant back to England.

Muted cheers broke out over the intercom, followed by happy chatter. Newboy found his way back to base without a hitch—like any true Texas navigator would. Valentine could have feathered an engine, just for effect. But he didn't. Fuck 'em. The crew chief met them when they landed, looking at the plane and not at Valentine. "The oil system is shot," Valentine told him. "And check the magnetos." Something was always wrong with the magnetos. Morris had to be helped out of the ship.

Red Cross girls were there, looking perky, offering booze and sandwiches,

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just as if they had bombed the hell out of Merseburg instead of turning back at the Dutch coast. Valentine thanked them, spiking some coffee with Hennessy's. First he had aborted a mission, now he was drinking in the morning. But he was not used to being back so early in the day. It felt funny.

There was no debriefing. Nothing to report except they had seen Holland. He got on his bike and tooled over to where he could smell apple trees. Whitewashed walls and thatched roofs showed through green leaves. Parking his bike beneath a tree, he sat staring at the sky. Two bad missions in a row—first the "smart" bombs, then a screwed-up ship. He had more tours behind him than anyone in the group. Hell, there were whole *squadrons* fresh from the States with fewer missions than he had flown. They owed him a lot. But what he got was goddamn glider bombs and *Chattanooga Choo Choo*.

Valentine reached for his bike, and there she was. Standing beside her own bike, abrupt and unexpected as a hallucination—a smiling blonde hallucination smelling of apple blossoms and English soap.

Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree (with anyone else but me)

She said her name was Anna—even then it did not sound right. With her flax-blonde hair, and eyes as blue as the sky over Krakow, her name should have had more syllables, and strange vowel sounds, with an awkward V or K. She had the accent for it, as if she had learned English from a half-deaf Polish aunt. Which turned out to be true. "You're a flier," she told him, "but not British." Anna acted like both were obvious.

"American," Valentine admitted. "And you?"

She tossed her head lightly; clearly "Anna" did not care to answer. "The country I was born in no longer exists."

"I suppose that makes you a Pole?"

"If you like. I come from Kamionka-Strumilowa." She pronounced the last part as if it had an "oo" in the middle and a "v" at the end. Valentine could not have spelled it to save his life. "It is by the Bug. When I was born, it was Russia, when I was a girl, it was Polish—but it is all German now. You don't want to hear about it. Tell me what America is like."

"Like most places, only more so." He gave her the swift verbal tour of the States—California, Manhattan, Biloxi, even Wendover, Utah, where his group had trained, a flat sage-and-sidewinder waste fit only for coyotes and air cadets. Civilization was a fly-trap bar and brothel astride the Nevada line.

But he wanted to talk about her. She was sharp and astute, with high cheekbones, and fine worry lines around her eyes, making her look just this side of thirty. But it's tough to tell a woman's age when she's flushed and full of life. He asked what she was doing in England.

Anna from Kamionka-Somewhere shrugged. He tried a more crucial question. "I mean, do you live near the base?"

Her reply was a winsome smile.

"You're not planning to answer—are you?"

"Apparently not." Anna turned the talk back to him. "Have you seen much of Europe?"

"A lot." Valentine considered himself an accomplished tourist, having seen Antwerp, Calais, Metz, Paris, Hamburg, and Berlin—all from four miles up. "But none of the places I visited ever wanted me back."

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"That makes you a bomber pilot. How exciting! I saw one come down the other day."

"That was exciting. But mostly it is a bore." He confessed to crashing *Shady Lady,* telling her about the trip to Cologne and the glider bombs.

Anna looked shocked. "You talk so freely."

"Nothing's freer than talk."

She tossed her hair again, looking askance at him. "We have just met," she reminded him. "I might be . . . *shpion*." She searched for the English word.

"A spy?" He slipped into his best Gable drawl, "Frankly, ma'am, I don't give a damn."

"How can you say that?"

He shrugged. "We showed how dumb those guided bombs were over Cologne. If Goering didn't get the message, he's blind as well as stupid." Valentine smiled at the notion of a Nazi spy biking about, her blouse loosely buttoned, showing a curve of breast. First rate disguise—the Gestapo had done itself proud. "When I first got into this game, some light colonel got up in front of the group and told us we would be baby-killers. Maybe it's true. From four miles up, it's hard to tell Nazis from normal folks. Soldiers from civilians. Women from kids."

She nodded soberly. Here she was, sitting right next to him, and Valentine could not be sure which side she was on, poking around airfields, talking to fliers, dodging questions.

"But I tell myself, we try. We bomb in daylight, going in straight and level, at the exact same height and speed, sitting ducks for flak and fighters—just so we can hit what we aim at." Targets were so precise that they had street addresses. 111 North High Street, Antwerp, stuck in his mind—a Ford Motors plant in occupied Belgium. His bombs had walked right up and knocked on the door. Now he felt betrayed. "And they nearly got us killed dropping glider bombs at random—raining down around Cologne, a city hit so many times we'd just be making the rubble bounce. You want to risk your life for *more*."

She pointed out, "There are people at home who think no bomb dropped on Germany is wasted."

"Those people don't dodge the *Luftwaffe* to drop them—it might make them more particular."

Her blue eyes flashed. "What do you know? To you, war is something you go *off to*. Something you might come *back* from, if you are lucky. What if war came to *you*? What if war rolled right over your town, into your neighborhood, consuming family and friends? The shopkeeper on the corner, the little girl down the street? You would not be so particular."

No wonder she hated talking about home. Throttle back, Valentine told himself. No sense making her mad. "You sound like a Polish Spitfire pilot—who just wants to kill Germans."

She laughed, "I *am* a pilot. Before the war I was in a parachute and flying club. It was wonderful. Everything was wonderful then—only we did not know it. I learned on gliders, then on fabric biplanes. But never a Spitfire." She grinned provocatively. "I was good—they made me an instructor."

"I bet they did." By then, he would have believed anything.

"Will you take me up?"

"What?" He wasn't sure he heard right.

"In your bomber. I have never been in a plane that big."

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"I've gotten in too much trouble doing that." He told how he sheared the wings off *Shady Lady III,* stunting to impress a cockpit full of Red Cross nurses. "No one got hurt, but they busted me to lieutenant. Swore they would convene a court martial and shoot me if I took another date up."

"A date?"

"Like you. I know a snug bed-and-breakfast in Chelsea."

She gave him a maybe-yes, maybe-no smile. They talked about aerobatics, and his chances of taking her to London—until he heard engines drone overhead. Leaping up, he scanned the treetops. "The group's back." Valentine could feel her standing beside him, straining to see.

The lead squadron appeared. Valentine began to count. "One . . . two . . . three . . ."

His group had fielded twenty-six planes that morning. *Chattanooga Choo Choo* had turned around. Twenty-five had gone on to Merseburg. "Seven . . . eight . . . nine . . ." As he counted he felt her draw closer. "Ten . . . eleven . . . twelve . . ."

By the time he got to twenty, he could feel her hand in his. "Twenty-one . . . twenty-two . . . twenty-three . . ."

Her hand tightened. "Twenty-four . . . twenty-five!"

He turned to her. "The whole damn group is in!" She nodded, her face so completely alight she had to have known it too. Had she counted them leaving at dawn? For a stray blonde on a bike, she knew a hell of a lot about the group.

Valentine righted his bike and swung a leg over the seat. Seeing her still smiling, and leaning a little his way, he chanced a kiss. She did not dodge or pull away. Pedaling back to the flight line, he could still feel her lips, soft and pliant, like none he had ever tasted. Drivers, cooks, mechanics, ground crews, and doughnut dollies were all gathered in front of the hangars and at the hardstands, waving wildly, giving the returning bombers V for victory. Crash truck engines idled, but no one expected them to leap into gear and race down the tarmac. Valentine got a ribbing for aborting a mission that turned out to be a lark—what they were already calling the Merseburg Milk Run. That did not bother him; it would have been way worse if the group had been shot to pieces. What bothered him was not knowing where Anna lived. Or how to get in touch with her.

And when he biked back out to the apple trees, all that greeted him was empty sky. Making Anna just a nice memory. What was solid and real was his new ship, a big silver B-17G-60, smelling of mothballs, fresh from Seattle via Wyoming—with a Bendix chin turret and a Cheyenne tail, courtesy of United Air Lines. The ground crew had already painted *Shady Lady VI* beneath the cockpit windows. "Make her a blonde this time," Valentine told them. Now he had no excuse not to fly. So they flew short hops to France, hitting ammo dumps and railway yards, seeing little flak and no sign of fighters. The *Luftwaffe* did not feel so lucky this far from home. Morris finished off his thirty missions without firing a shot.

When Morris rotated home, Sheepdip returned. He had gone AWOL without leaving the base. MPs found him drunk and disorderly in an empty ammo bunker, on a heroic bender with a pair of British birds—who were themselves deserters from a Midlands munitions factory. They busted him to buck sergeant, threw him in the brig to sober him up, then returned him to the crew. There his nominal assignment was to wrestle a .50 caliber waist gun in a freezing slipstream while beset by flak and fighters—further punishment seemed redundant.

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On the fourth of June, they returned from hitting an airfield at St. Dizier to hear that the 5th Army had taken Rome. Then came D-Day. Support missions started at dawn—bombing on instruments through heavy clouds, fearing they were hitting GIs on Omaha Beach. When the clouds cleared, Valentine saw thousands of wakes cutting the channel, and a sky full of planes—all of them friendly. *Shady Lady* came in so low he cold count the troops struggling ashore. Troops and tanks were pouring inland, taking ground that he had merely flown over.

He told himself that this was his last tour. After he completed his first fifty missions in the Pacific in the original *Shady Lady*, they pulled him out for rest. The next day, his crew and plane vanished over the Solomons. . . . No one in the formation saw them go down. It had seemed like his fault. From then on, he signed up for tour after tour. But that had to stop sometime.

As reward for a job well done, the group treated combat crews to an Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences documentary on VD. Valentine ducked out, figuring Hollywood had little to teach him about the dangers of sex. A long time had gone by since he had seen Anna under the apple trees. Hell, France had been invaded! Rome had fallen—again.

And there she was, leaning on her battered black bike, as blonde as ever—just like he'd left her. "Don't ever do that," he told her.

"Do what?" She looked happy to be out in the sun.

"Disappear like that."

She gave him a there's-a-war-on shrug. Either of them could disappear at any time. "I had things to do."

"At least tell me where you are staying."

Anna acted annoyed by the question. "That's a secret."

By now, he knew she was good at keeping secrets; way better than him. "Then at least come to London with me."

She laughed lightly. "That I can do—if you would like?"

"Is that a trick question?" Anna fascinated him, and not just carnally. Valentine had never met anyone whose horizons were so varied. She could talk airplanes and jazz argot, could quote Hegel's dialectic or Bessie Smith's blues. Her American heroes were Big Bill Haywood and Amelia Earhart, but she had never heard of baseball, hot dogs, or F. Scott Fitzgerald. This time, the parting kiss was not so virginal. She kissed like she had done it before, and liked it a lot. He had a horrid thought—"How can I get word to you when my next pass comes up?"

"I'll know." She was not kidding; a week later, when he got an overnight pass, she was there, packed and ready. If Valentine had not been so happy, he would have thought it spooky.

The train ride was heaven. From Ipswich to Chadwell Heath, they marveled at green English countryside, passing stone bridges, castle ruins, and tinker caravans. Aside from the abbreviated time tables and the deluge of uniforms, it was impossible to believe that the world was at war—that Europe was occupied from Oslo to Athens. That France was being invaded, and that Germany was being bombed day and night. That armies pounded each other daily from New Guinea to Finland. Then came the city, Stratford, Hackney, Islington, and King's Cross. They took the tube to Chelsea, where she waited demurely as he paid for a single room and a single bed—under English Common Law, that implied consent.

After seeing Humphrey Bogart lose Ingrid Bergman to Paul Henreid,

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Valentine finished up the seduction with champagne at the Savoy—as a flight captain, he was better paid than a British Admiral, and treated pounds sterling like monopoly money. Music throbbed through the hotel foyer, a jazz band playing "Down Mexico Way." Anna surprised him by singing in English with the band. Was there anything she couldn't do? He would soon know. How amazing to sit across a lace-topped table from such a woman, laughing and talking, knowing they would soon be sharing an undersized British bed—it made him think way better of the war. "What are you thinking?" she asked, smiling across the table.

He smiled back. "It's a secret."

She leaned closer, acting tipsy, "Sure you will not tell?"

"No. But I'll show you." Getting up, he steered her toward the door, leaving a tip designed to boost Anglo-American relations. As they reached the street, sirens began to wail.

Searchlights stabbed at the sky, and Valentine heard a back-and-forth chugging overhead, like a Model-T going uphill. Someone shouted, "Buzz bomb!" and the crowd at the Savoy surged toward the underground. Flak guns banged away, a pointless waste of ammo so far as Valentine could see. The pilotless bomb was meant to drop at random into the city. Shooting it down would only shift the point of impact. Besides, London was huge, and the chances of the bomb hitting his bed in Chelsea were less than one in a million. He faced worse odds than that just to complete a mission—and bedding Anna was way more important. The evil throb of the pulse jet ceased. Silence overhead. Even the guns stopped. The missile had started to fall.

"Seven seconds," a bobby nodded toward the tube station stairs, meaning they had that long before the bomb hit. As they reached the bottom step a tremendous boom shook the station. He hoped to hell it had not hit the Savoy—the band had still been playing when they left.

People poured into the tube station. Buzz bombs had been a sometime thing, but tonight the city was being hit bad. Double-decker bunks along the wall filled up. Families bedded down on the concrete. He watched as Anna started to play with a little girl who claimed to be five, but looked like two or three. Wartime rations left little room for growth.

Blue eyes alight, Anna did sleight-of-hand tricks, laughing along with the child, whose war-weary mother was clearly delighted. Hardly the moment for Valentine to say, "Hey Madame, I know bombs are falling and the city's in an uproar, but would you mind your own child? I'm a Yank—oversexed, you know—and I counted on getting some tonight." Instead he settled down to wait it out. Trains whipped by, sucking hot stale air down the tracks. Goddamn V-1s. Another reason to curse random bombing—pounding cities in the hopes of killing someone. Anyone. He had hated it over Cologne, and did not like it a bit better here in London. With the heats, light, and racket, the child showed boundless energy, taking forever to fall asleep.

When the little girl at last nodded off, Anna snuggled up next to him, whispering, "They're superb."

"Who are?"

"Children," she laughed, smiling at him like he was crazy.

"Got any?" Valentine grinned, thinking he was being funny.

"Yes, two." She closed her eyes, leaning her head on his shoulder.

He felt like someone had thrown a pail of ice water over him. Anna, a mother? It was something he had never thought to ask—she had seemed so complete in herself. "Really?"

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"A boy who is eight, and a girl who is five. Just like this one." She ran an absent hand through the sleeping child's hair. "Or so I suppose. I have not seen either of them in almost three years. Just letters, and, every so often, a picture."

She said it simply, but he could feel the hollowness, like a cannon hole in the chest. "And a husband?" Another question he had never gotten around to asking.

Anna let her head rest on his shoulder. "Oh, yes. A husband and a boyfriend." Totally taken aback, Valentine figured his chances with Anna had done an alarming nose dive, unless she was just naturally promiscuous.

"Both dead," she added, and slipped her hand into his. Soon she was asleep. He sat watching trains roar by, feeling her sleeping weight against him, trying to imagine the hand he held stroking dead lovers, or soothing lost children. She talked of love and death, children and separation, as if they were the most natural things imaginable. As though they happened to everyone.

Daylight emptied most of the bunks. During the Blitz, dawn meant an end to the bombing—but buzz bombs could come down anytime. Still, people struggled out of the underground. Daylight meant going to work, or school, or just going home to see if the house was still there. To Valentine, it meant going back to Bury Saint. Edmunds, and kissing Anna good-bye at the station, while the train engine sighed steam behind them. He never got her into that undersized bed in Chelsea.

Rhapsody in Blue

Valentine got "a bit of his own back" when the group hit Germany again—his first visit since Cologne—pounding a Volkswagen plant at Fellersleben that was now turning out V-1 buzz bombs instead of funny little cars. He seldom felt so personal about a target. "That's for the Savoy." It was the crew's twenty-ninth mission—next to last. Afterward, he sat under the apple tree to see if Anna would show. Tomorrow his tour was up—a tour with two more crashes and an abort. Battle fatigue and more. He was dead tired of riding the thin line between being dauntless and flak-happy.

Anna did not show. No surprise. He'd missed his chance with her in London, thanks to the V-1s. Hitler's wonder weapon worked on him, leaving Anna as much of a mystery as the day he spotted her biking down the lane on his way back from Cologne. Maybe more so. Tomorrow was the last time out, then home to America.

Pedaling back to the airfield, he found a dog-robbing major waiting beside a big olive-drab Bentley with general's stars on the bumper. "Captain Valentine? Put on your class-As and come with me." The dog-robber refused to answer questions—meaning the major didn't know shit—and stayed up front with the driver, who was British and very good looking. The bigger the brass, the more beautiful the driver. Ike's was a fashion model before the war. Valentine had given her a fast pass at a party, finding her smart, witty, and thoroughly in love with her general. Some guys resented it, but Valentine liked seeing his superiors getting some—giving them something to live for, making them less apt to order up suicide missions.

He was treated to a long ride on the wrong side of the road, across Cambridgeshire, Hertford, and Buckinghamshire, with the blackout curtains

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drawn. Sitting in the dark in his dress uniform, Valentine quizzed his conscience. Since the Meresburg Milk Run, he'd had a spotless rap sheet, and it was godawful late to call him onto the carpet for refusing to fly *Chattanooga Choo Choo*. Though the army could be alarmingly slow at times. They were sure as hell not giving him a medal for finishing his tour without complaint. Or wanting his opinion on guided bombs.

When the Bentley rolled to a stop, the driver popped out, opening his door. He recognized the pointed roofline of PINETREE, the Eighth Bomber Command headquarters at High Wycome. Brits were unstinting with staff accommodations. Air Division HQ at Elveden Hall was a maharaja's palace—minus the furniture and dancing girls—making it look like a chandeliered gymnasium. High Wycombe had been a girl's' school before the war. Duty officers were besieged by ringing bells, until they took down the bedside cards reading, "*Ring Twice for House Mistress*." They led him to some headmistress' sitting room, all leather and mahogany; instead of errant schoolgirls, it held a flock of bird colonels, plus enough stars to fill out a constellation. The "Old Man" was there, General Jimmy Doolittle, looking like a balding Edward G. Robinson, though Spencer Tracy played him in *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*. This was the Hollywood War, with actors playing pilots and stars piloting planes. Clark Gable flew with the 351st Bomb Group out of Polebrook, and Jimmy Stewart was a copilot with the 453rd, flying B-24s.

The CO suggested that Valentine be seated—which he took as an order. Doolittle was the sort of CO who flew a B-26 "Widow Maker" on one engine, just to show trainees it could be done. A big, beefy brigadier in intelligence opened the show. "Captain Valentine, were you on the October 14th mission to Schweinfurt?" Valentine nodded cautiously. The group had lost a third of its strength over Schweinfurt—not a nightmare he could soon forget.

"Did you see anything unusual in the air that day?"

A lot of strange things had happened over Schweinfurt, like the South Carolina gunner who took over from a dying pilot and swore that "Jesus Christ hisself" appeared in the shot-up cockpit to give him the heading to England—but Valentine guessed that all the brass and braid had not come to hear Jesus had returned. "Do you mean the disk?"

"Yes." The brigadier leaned forward. "Describe the disk."

He shrugged. There was not much to tell. Half the group had seen it, a bluish metal disk flying parallel to the formation as they approached the Initial Point, preparing to make their bomb run. "It came up from behind us, going like a bat."

"How fast would that be?"

"Way faster than the formation. Six to seven hundred miles an hour," he estimated. "But it came to a quick stop, idling alongside us."

"How big would you say it was?"

"Hard to say. Maybe the size of a medium bomber." It had been hell in the air, with flak and rockets bursting within the group, amid a rain of shell casings and aircraft debris. So many bombers were hit and abandoned that it looked like Schweinfurt was under parachute assault. Not a moment for clocking and measuring mysterious flying objects.

Doolittle spoke up. "Did the disk make a move to attack?"

"No, sir." It hardly needed to. The formation was being ripped to pieces by ferocious fighter assaults—but these men knew that; they'd sent two air divisions into that disaster. "It flew with us past the IP into the bomb run, then shot straight up, like a helicopter, rocketing past thirty thousand feet

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and out of sight. Immediately afterward, our division was jumped by over a hundred and fifty fighters. We never saw where the disk went." Or cared much.

"We think we know where it went," the Intelligence Director declared. "The disk didn't show when the 15th Air Force hit Schweinfurt during 'Big Week' or when we went back in March. Nor during the RAF night attacks. Whatever it was has been pulled back deeper into the Reich." He glanced about, to be sure no Nazi spies lurked under the headmistress's desk. "When the Soviets launched their winter offensive, they ran into the disk northeast of Lwow." Like a well-trained intelligence officer, he pronounced it as if the L was followed by a v, an oo, and an f. "This time, the disk attacked, wiping out a crack Soviet night bomber unit."

Valentine saw trouble coming. Buzz bombs were a paltry terror compared to an enemy interceptor that could see in the dark and fly straight up at the speed of sound. Nor were they telling him this to be chatty—they expected him to *do* something about it. Doolittle delivered the bad news. "The Soviets need our help. They want daylight photographs of the area, and they want us to drop an officer behind German lines to make contact with Polish partisans."

Valentine swallowed hard. "Not me, I hope."

"Oh, no." The CO chuckled. "A Soviet officer. Major Yevdokia Anasova of the 46th Guards Regiment."

The Operations Chief took over—a tall Major General playing George Raft to the CO's "Little Caesar"—"Tomorrow we will make a maximum effort against Berlin. Instead of returning to England, your group will go on to land in Poltava, Russia."

"Actually the Ukraine," the Intelligence brigadier noted.

"Right—the Ukraine." The Head of Operations was not happy having a wise-ass brigadier butt in. "Two ships will break off, escorted by a P-51 squadron, one to take photos and the other to make the parachute drop. We want you for the drop-ship."

Valentine swore silently. What idiocy. Hit Berlin, then on to Russia, taking snapshots and dropping off passengers—it made glider bombing sound sane. He managed a modest, "Why me?"

"You were specifically requested." Doolittle gave him a smug gravedigger smile. On the first mission to Tokyo, the CO had taken off without enough fuel to get home—planning to crash-land somewhere in China. All in a day's work for a gallant sawed-off idiot. He'd led the first raid on Rome, and would have been first to Berlin, but Ike would not let him go. "The Messerschmitt jets are coming; we have spotted their exhaust marks on runways. If this disk hits us too, it's a whole new ball game."

Valentine took a slow breath, none too pleased with the *old* game. "Do I get to think this over? I'd like to talk to my navigator." Newboy had made great strides, but Lwow was a long way from Waco.

Not the answer they wanted. The CO frowned. "You were the one requested. But if you are not 100 percent behind this, tell us in time to brief another crew."

Valentine was not even 2 percent behind this, but was not going to say that to a room full of brass. He asked, "Requested by *who?*"

The Intelligence brigadier looked at the CO, then answered, "By the Russians."

Which made absolutely no sense. Except for a pinko cousin in the Bronx,

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he had no connections to Stalin. As he saluted and left, Valentine could hear the brigadier saying, "He'll do it. . . ."

That's what you think; the more Valentine turned it over in his head, the more it seemed like one of those mad missions that did nothing but kill a few score sods on both sides. If Bomber Command wanted to parachute commie majors into exotic locales, let them get some other idiot. Stepping into summer twilight, he found the dog-robbing major waiting by the door of the Bentley, wearing a satisfied smirk—making Valentine glad that he was telling them to shove it. The beautiful driver opened his door, and Valentine slid in, back to Bury Saint Edmunds and a warm bed.

Right beside him was Anna, sitting in the back seat of the Bentley, dressed in some strange uniform, as cool and calm as if she had a right to be there. The dog-robber introduced them with a grin, "Captain Valentine, meet Major Yevdokia Anasova, 46th Guards Air Regiment."

"Jesus Fucking Christ!" It took Valentine a second to realize he said it aloud—much to the two majors' amusement. He stared at Anna. "What in damnation are you doing here dressed like that?"

She gave him her there's-a-war-on shrug. "This is my uniform. And I am here because you are going to drop me northeast of Lwow. By parachute."

He wanted to say, "Like hell I will!" but bit it back. "I won't do anything until you tell me everything."

"You are not cleared to hear everything," she replied primly.

"Start with the simple stuff," he suggested.

She blushed. "Well, as you see, I have been leading a double life."

"Putting you two ahead of me."

"But I was not lying about you and me," she pleaded. "Or about being a pilot. My regiment is all women, pilots, observers, mechanics, armorers. . . ."

"Where can I enlist?"

She laughed. "Silly. You could not pass the physical. Right now I am on detached duty. I told you I had something to do in England—this is it. My mission is to be liaison between our Intelligence, your people, and the Polish Home Army. None of us trust each other, but we all need to know about the disk, and what else the Nazis have hidden east of Lwow."

Right, the disk. "Seems a roundabout way to get to Poland."

"Much of our information comes from the Polish Home Army here in London. Until I arrived, they would not even consider sharing anything with us. But I have seen the disk. And I grew up in the area. Also I am a regular flying officer, not NKVD."

And good-looking to boot. He could see all the reasons for sending a woman—a brave pretty pilot who spoke good English and flawless Polish—far less intimidating than some commie secret policeman, perfect, in fact, for melting Polish resistance. It had sure worked on him. And the perfect sacrifice too—parachuting into a snake pit. Germans, Poles, and Communists, all fighting each other, and none trusting her. The more she won the Poles over, the less loyal she would look to the Soviets. A tiny misstep, or too-easy success, would be seen as betrayal by someone. It was a wonder they bothered to give her a parachute. Gently, she took his hand. "You do not like this, do you?"

"That's for damned sure! How much of what you have been feeding me is true?"

"Oh, most of it. Everything started innocently. Your group was to do the drop, so I biked out to look at the base. Then we met. It seemed so natural."

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"Believe me, there is nothing natural about busting my butt to hop in bed with a senior officer." The natural order of things was for them to try to screw him.

She smiled. "Once I got to know you, I wanted to fly with you. Your people wanted someone else. Someone more, well, ah . . ."

He lifted an eyebrow. "More stable?"

"Exactly. But I have a little pull." She sounded proud.

"It's nice to know that when they come up with a *really* harebrained scheme, mine is not the name at the top of the list."

She turned serious. "Harebrained? Do you think bad of me?"

"No. I think you are absolutely wonderful. But that does not make me want to drop you out of a plane over Poland."

Her smile warmed up. "Wonderful? Really?"

He kissed her, and she kissed back. Too bad they were both in their dress uniforms, riding in a staff car with a driver and dog-robber for chaperons. Things never went the way Valentine planned them. Back at the base, he took her to his room, which was shabby and ill-kept, decorated with pictures of women and P-51s. The two things bomber crews most wanted to see. Grant had been his roommate, until Grant was riddled with glass and shrapnel over Cologne. Now he roomed with Newboy, whose mouth dropped open when Anna strolled in and sat down on the bed. Valentine told him, "This is a Soviet liaison officer. Show her some southern hospitality, while I check on the crew."

"Right away, Cap'n." The Texan swung his feet onto the floor and reached for a bottle, saying to Anna, "I'm awfully proud to meet yew, ma'am."

"Get her some dinner. And listen to what she says. This time tomorrow you'll be in Poltava—if you're lucky. It's in Russia." The Ukraine, actually, but that was close enough for a Texas navigator. Alerting LeForge and Bader, he stopped off at the sergeant's hut, where an end-of-tour party was already underway. Radios played, and Sinatra sang just down the hall.

Everyone got a kick out of seeing him dolled up in his class-As. Jack Dog and Krautmeyer were feeding live ammo into one of the big coke stoves. Heinrich Krautmeyer—their armorer—had been tagged as a German spy because of his name, but was the only one on the crew who understood bomb racks. He and Jack Dog had cranked up the stove, then started with little .22 shells, throwing them in to hear them pop. By the time Valentine got there they had worked their way up to .30-30 and .45 ammo. Someone down the hall yelled for them to stop the racket. Sinatra was being drowned out by gunfire. "It's unlucky. You got a mission to go. What if you don't make it?"

"Then we damn well better celebrate *now!*" Jack Dog yelled back, throwing in a handful of .50 caliber machine gun shells, blasting big dents in the coke stove. Sheepdip had several missions left to fly, to make up for going AWOL. But he was celebrating along with them, smelling like a dirty still. He had not bathed since getting out of the brig—bent on completing his tour without sampling English soap.

Valentine added his vote to the Sinatra fan club. "Stow the fireworks and get some sleep. We're going up tomorrow. Last call." There was not much that could discipline a crew with only one mission to go. What could you do? Throw them in the brig? Threaten to *not* send them to Berlin? He told Silverman to expect company in the radio room. "We're taking on a passenger."

Silverman asked, "Who?"

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"Some stray blonde." They all laughed. Captain Valentine was such a card.

"Like the one on the bike?" suggested Kraut.

"You guessed it."

When he got back to the room, Anna and Newboy were getting on famously. She had the knack for making friends. Dinner sat half-eaten beside her on the bed. Newboy handed him the bourbon. "Thought yew was kiddin' about Russia."

Valentine gave him a have-I-ever-lied-to-you look. Maps spread on the floor showed not just the Ukraine and Germany, but Rumania, Yugoslavia, and the Adriatic. The group would return to England by way of Italy, so normal pre-mission secrecy was suspended. Navigators needed to know where they were headed. And a portion of the ground crews weas coming along, to repair, refuel, and rearm the planes at Poltava. All under the fitting code name—Operation FRANTIC.

By "lights out," the bottle was empty and the maps were back in their cases. Being a true-blue Texas gentleman, Newboy wandered off to find somewhere else to sleep, though no one really needed his bed. Valentine sat down in the dark beside Anna. The bed beneath them was his only in a temporary sense. Of the men who had had it before him, four were dead, three MIA, and another was a POW in a German Stalag. One MIA had been a friend from a previous tour, the others were all strangers. He told her, "I don't think I can do it."

"Do what?" She sounded amused, provocatively tipsy, like at the Savoy.

"I don't think I can share this bed with you tonight, then drop you out the bomb bay tomorrow."

"But you must," she insisted.

"Must what? Make love, or drop you out over Poland?"

"Both." He could hear her smile in the dark.

"I'm not made that way," he told her. "I care about you too much."

"And I care about you—but we both have our duty to do. At home, it is another world; we fly night bombers, biplanes with tiny engines and no guns. Nothing like you are used to. We never salute, and we call each other by first names, unless there are men around. Katya, my observer, brought her doll from home. She carried it in the cockpit, because she was only seventeen. I could not break her of it."

"That's nothing. Jack Dog's only nineteen, and sits at his tail guns reading dirty novels. I can't break him of *that*."

She laughed, then grew serious again. "We never fear fighters by day, since we fly too low and slow to be caught. But the dark is different. In January, six of our planes lined up in the dead of night to hit the railway yard at Busk. I led. Suddenly, my instrument panel blew up in my face. No warning, just *bang,* bullets tearing through the cockpit. I flipped into a spin, but tracers kept pouring through my plane. Only blind luck saved me. When my engine blew, the attacker broke off, working his way back along the line, hitting us one by one. I made a dead stick landing, and watched the others go down. They never had a chance. No guns. No warning. The attacker was not a night fighter, but a bluish metal disk."

"I think I see," Valentine mumbled.

"Do you? Twelve women went up that night; only I am alive. Katya bled to death on her doll. I owe it to them to do this."

He stared into the dark, knowing he had a home to be rotated back to.

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Anna from Kamionka-Strumilowa didn't—just a battle zone that he would parachute her back into. She took his hand, asking, "What's the worst that could happen?"

"We could never see each other again."

"Silly, that's bound to happen, so we must do it now." She sounded like Jack Dog, feeding live ammo into a hot stove. "I loved my husband, and my boyfriend. I am sorry they died. I wept for days both times. But we owe it to them to keep living."

And to Katya. Not to mention all the guys who had used the bed. But as he unbuttoned her uniform, he kept thinking that if the upcoming operation came off perfectly "as planned," tomorrow night he would be in Poltava—really hating the war.

The lieutenant who came at two A.M. to wake him did a double-take, seeing a second blonde head poking out of the blanket. But all he said was, "Breakfast in half an hour. Briefing at three-thirty."

Valentine slid silently out of bed to let Anna sleep. When he came back with coffee and breakfast she was already awake, grinning at him from under the covers. "No need to sneak out. I am a night pilot, remember? Sleeping so late is a luxury."

He set the food and coffee down beside her. "We all thought Russian Guards Air Regiments got their breakfast in bed."

She laughed at the thought. "Not likely."

"Really? The boys will be disappointed when we get to Poltava."

"Wait until they see the base crews!" She smiled at him over her coffee. He had to leave to go to the briefing, a sad waste of time; by now, everyone knew the big news. Since they were going on to Russia, the group got the soft target, Ruhland, south of the main Berlin flak zones. The only real news was the weather. Opposition was bound to be everything the *Luftwaffe* had. Leaving her uniform as a remembrance, Anna put on work overalls beneath her flight suit and parachute harness, riding with them in the truck to the hardstand. For once, no one complained about the crowding, or bitched about flak or fighters. Flabbergasted crewmen just wanted to know who she was.

"A liaison," Valentine explained airily.

"We guessed that, Cap'n. But what's she doing *here?*"

If he had told them they were going to throw her out over Poland, he would have had a mutiny. He saved that bad news for when they were in the air. At the hardstand, she leaped out, eager to get aboard the huge silver plane. The crew chief looked startled, but tipped his Bosox cap and helped swing her up into the B-17, then asked, "What gives?"

"Ain't you heard? Russian base crews are all women."

"Pretty ones."

"That's why we ain't taking any of *you*." Other bombers were taking crew chiefs, or engineering officers. Even the group PR officer was going. This was Berlin, the Big B. Then Russia.

Valentine found Anna sitting in the left-hand seat, her hands on the controls. "That's my seat. You're riding in the radio room."

She shrugged, "Just seeing how it felt." As it turned out, Newboy had already invited her into the nose for take-off. Valentine could feel himself fast losing control of the crew. Last mission, with a woman aboard! He'd be lucky if they didn't end up taking a vote and deciding to fly to Sweden.

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Operation FRANTIC took off, and they made formation almost on time, positioned between *Danny Boy* and the photo-ship, *Miss Behavin'*. Over the North Sea, they went onto oxygen, and Anna crawled back to the radio room, being the model passenger, letting Newboy attend to "bidness." Ahead lay the Dutch coast, and dirty bursts of flak. Crewmen tested their guns. No one had so much as *seen* a German fighter since Cologne, and new crews talked like the *Luftwaffe* was a figment of the older men's imagination. Everyone bet that Berlin would be different.

Over Holland, he spotted a big twin-engine formation going the wrong way—possibly Mosquitoes—RAF planes returning from a dawn strike. Leaning forward, Valentine tried to get a closer look. Blinding sunlight splashed on the dirty bullet-proof glass. The dots got bigger, and kept on coming. Hunching down in his seat, trying to make himself less of a target, he called into the intercom, "Look sharp. Bandits 12 o'clock."

"Here they come," someone yelled. "Hey diddle, diddle. Right up the middle!" The "Brits" were Me 410s, twin-engine bomber destroyers, making a head-on pass at the box, each firing a half-dozen heavy cannons. Valentine clung to the thought that Anna was in the radio room, behind armor and the bomb bay. If a shell exploded in the cockpit, his troubles were over. If Anna was killed, he had to live with it. Closing at 200 yards per second, the fighters were the size of his fingernail and opening fire, noses blinking flame. A second later they were twice as big, turning to avoid collision. Another second and they were screaming through the formation, so close that he could see seams on their engine cowlings, and smoke pouring from their gun muzzles.

Ahead of him, a bomber went down, Tokyo tanks on fire. Parachutes blossomed. Valentine counted. One. Two more. Then four. Then the B-17 blew apart. More Messerschmitts came screaming down through the high group, headed for them. *Shady Lady* shook from cannon hits, and Sheepdip shouted, "Smoke in the waist."

"Radio room's been hit," someone added. "It's burning."

With Anna inside. Chisholm's guns fell silent. It was Chief's job to fight the fire, just as it was Valentine's job to keep the burning plane flying in formation. He hugged the control yoke, slick with sweat, making hasty deals with the Almighty. Let Anna be alive, and I swear to be good. An Me 410 plunged past, its tail shot through and spinning like a whirligig—tied to the fuselage by control cables. Then it was gone. Empty skies all around the bombers were crisscrossed by smoke trails and dotted with chutes—but showed no sign of *Luftwaffe* or Little Friends. The war had moved elsewhere.

He jerked off his rubber oxygen mask, pouring sweat and drool into his lap. "Fire's out," came over the intercom. Moments ago, he had been close enough to see the Messerschmitt's gun muzzles, now he was back to plowing along in peaceful formation, full power, the fire out, with not even flak to worry about. Letting him fix all his fears on Anna. Let her be alive. Better yet, alive and unhurt. . . .

Gloves gripped his shoulder. He looked back, expecting to see Chisholm or Silverman, but it was Anna. Face and flight suit black with soot, she looked worried, saying anxiously, "Your radio's gone." Like he gave a good goddamn about the radio.

"What about Silverman?"

"He's all right. No one is hurt. But you have no radio."

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"Right." No radio. Soon he would miss it. Right now it seemed like getting off cheap. He had been willing to trade the whole plane for her—and then some. Everything seemed brighter and clearer, drenched in color. Sunlight shone on the silver ship.

With no radio room to go back to, Anna stood plugged into the engineer's station, her hand on his shoulder, staring at blue skies and the thousand bomber stream. "It is mesmerizing, being part of something so big. We sneak out at night with a few little bombs, looking for something to drop them on. This is like a flying city." Population ten thousand, five miles up and a hundred miles long, headed past Hannover and Brunswick. Ahead lay Magdeburg, and the Berlin defenses, already opening up on the lead division. Flak you could walk on.

Then, in a magical moment, the wing they were with turned away toward Ruhland. The great black carpet of flak veered off to the left. Smaller patches appeared ahead. Fewer people shoving shells into not so many guns—still trying their level best to kill you, sure, but again it felt like a bargain. At the IP, heading into the bomb run, Valentine gave up control to Bader and the bomb sight. Their target peeked through scattered clouds, big tanks, cracking towers, and refinery stacks. Sitting back, hands off the controls, he felt *Shady Lady* rock from impact, and heard shrapnel hitting the ship, sounding like someone throwing handfuls of gravel. As the bombs released, the ship ahead and to the left blew up. One moment, the bomber was there, ten men riding inside. The next, a short string of bombs hung beneath a sooty blotch in the sky. It was *Miss Behavin',* the photo ship.

After that, nothing. No flak. No fighters. They bored on past Berlin, over parts of the Reich that had never seen enemy aircraft in daylight. Seventy-odd P-51s were meeting them at the Polish border—many more fighters than the rear areas they were flying over could muster.

LeForge put an end to this good feeling, reporting a trail of white vapor from a flak hole in his wing. "We have a leak in the starboard tanks." The tanks were supposedly leakproof, but they could hardly complain to Boeing. Leaving Germany behind, Valentine watched their fuel drop, doubting they would ever see Poltava. No radio. No photo ship. And now no fuel. Operation FRANTIC indeed. His dwindling mission looked every bit as impossible as it had in that brass-filled room back in PINETREE.

Anna had gone down to help Newboy navigate across Poland. Valentine called her back up into the cockpit, saying, "We have to write this off." Failure meant he no longer had to drop her out the bomb bay.

She looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"We've been hit. We don't have the fuel to reach Poltava."

"So?" Clearly Anna was swept up in the "mission."

"Our radio's out," he reminded her. "And the photo ship is gone."

"But the disk. We must . . ."

"Damn the disk! We are badly shot-up. There's no one to snap pictures. We can't radio our fighter escort." These all seemed like really good reasons to Valentine.

"Then we will go in alone." She spoke like a Guards major. No pity, no excuses, just do it. Putting them on the verge of their first fight, several miles up somewhere west of Warsaw. "Without fuel to reach Poltava, you must break formation anyway," she pointed out. "After the drop, you can land at Dubno inside our lines. I will show your navigator."

Valentine stared up at her, seeing cold female practicality personified, her

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hand on his shoulder, a determined look on her soot-smudged face. She was right, of course. But he did not want to be practical; he wanted to be safe, and for her to be safe. He wanted Anna to guide them to Dubno—or some other safe haven where they could take a well-earned breather from the war—but he had no good arguments beyond naked self-interest. "Okay. Dubno it is. Give Newboy a hand."

East of Warsaw, the *Luftwaffe* made a face-saving attack, sending up twenty black-nosed FW 190s, with yellow tips on their wings. The P-51s brushed them aside, and the skies around them were empty when Anna and Newboy came up with a new heading. As they slipped silently out of formation, a P-51 came down for a look. Valentine recognized the blue nose and spinner of the 352nd Fighter Group. The Mustang had the ominous slogan "THIS IS IT" painted on the fuselage. He hand-signaled he was losing fuel, inviting the fighter to stick with them.

Approaching the drop point like it was a bomb run, he turned control over to Bader in the nose, then crouched in the open bomb bay as Anna got ready to jump. Polish countryside crawled past miles below. Pushing back her goggles, Anna washed her face with water from her canteen—trying to look less like a pilot, more like a peasant. She gave him a last smile, then looked down for her aiming points. Valentine had known all along that if he did everything right, piloting his plane through insanely tough defenses, then things would end like this. She would jump, and he would likely never see her again. Only failure could have saved them. Moments like this made him especially hate the war.

Sheepdip stuck his head into the bomb bay, saying, "Captain, we got a bandit you better look at."

Valentine scrambled back through the burnt-out radio room to the waist. Looking out the right waist window, he saw the bandit, not a German fighter this time, but a bluish metal disk—*the* disk—flying parallel to them. He saw no sign of the blue-nosed Mustang.

Without warning, the disk whipped around at a right angle to its line of flight, making a firing pass. Gunfire shook the ship as Chisholm and Sheepdip opened up on the disk. Newboy joined in from the nose. That tore it. They could not both defend themselves and make the drop. He dived back into the bomb bay, shouting to Anna it was no go.

She crouched with her back to him, staring down through the open bomb bay, searching for her aiming points, unable to hear over the rush of air and rattle of gunfire. Dense clouds came out of nowhere, obliterating the landscape below, swirling up into the bomb bay, blotting out everything. Valentine could hardly see his hand in front of him, much less the aiming points miles below. He grabbed at Anna to keep her from jumping.

But she was gone. She'd jumped anyway, tumbling face-first into wet darkness. So long, Anna from Kamionka-Strumilowa, hope the war treats you well. Gunfire ceased. Valentine sat in the empty bomb bay, thoroughly defeated. First guided bombs, now a brave dedicated blonde with lips like none he had ever tasted. He dearly missed the days when they dropped nothing but blunt stupid explosives.

American Patrol

Operation FRANTIC fully lived up to its name. Climbing back to the

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cockpit, Valentine asked where the hell the cloud cover had come from. Skies had been utterly clear before the drop. LeForge looked helplessly back at him. "Out of nowhere." For once, the copilot could not be blamed. Bader, flying the plane from the nose, had not seen the clouds coming either—they just appeared. And lurking in the murk was that see-in-the-dark disk. Taking over control, Valentine put the nose down, feeling for the deck while LeForge called out altimeter readings. At five thousand feet the overcast thinned. He saw wooded countryside below, cut by shining loops of river—but no sign of the disk. Or their Mustang escort. Or Anna's chute. He called over the intercom, "Anyone see the disk?"

"No, nothing."

"What disk? Where?"

Good. Valentine breathed easier. Newboy announced he was lost, no surprise there. Taking over Bader's seat in the nose, Newboy looked for landmarks, claiming he could see the Bug, but no sign of the railway lines radiating out of Lwow. "We should be crossing the front about now—but I am not sure where."

Another reason to want Anna with them. They were crossing the lines between the two biggest armies in creation; land fought over so often that every acre had a trench line or bomb crater. But Valentine saw no sign of it. No troops. No tanks. No trenches. Not so much as a shell hole. No sign of the thousands of trucks and carts modern armies needed. Or the roads they ran on. And nothing resembling an airfield—just dark woods and open steppe.

"Maybe this is like the Ozarks of Russia," Newboy suggested.

Valentine took them lower. "Forget the Ozarks. This ain't Arkansas. Look for some part of Russia you can *recognize*." Or Poland. Or the Ukraine. By now he was not picky. They did not have the fuel to look forever.

"What's that white stuff?" White patches covered everything.

"If it wasn't June, I'd say it was snow."

Newboy called out, "Town ahead."

"Which one?"

"Not sure." Newboy made it sound like, "No idea."

Valentine dropped down for a look. Not much of a town. Burnt buildings ringed by a broken wall. At last they were seeing signs of the war—the place had plainly been fought over. Beyond the town, he saw rows of tents, hundreds of them. And carts. And a huge horse herd. He banked to get a better look. "Looks like a cavalry division camped by the town."

"Cossacks?"

"Hope so." He didn't think the Germans had horse cavalry. Valentine flew low over a cleared field near the town, seeing if it was solid enough for a landing. With no radio, they were reduced to setting down and asking directions. Horses and men scattered. Women on the town side waved, always a welcome sign. "We don't have the fuel to fart around, so I'm going to shoot a landing. Which should leave us enough in the tanks to take off again—if this is the wrong spot."

Back in the Pacific, he had once landed on a beach. This landing was not near as bad. Until the end. White hummocks turned out to be snow, and as they rolled to a stop, the right wheel crunched through some ice into a creek. *Shady Lady* slewed sharply to a stop. He unbuckled his seat harness, saying, "Get out the phrase books." Again wishing for Anna.

Dropping out the nose door, his boots rang on iron-hard ground. The air outside felt more like twenty thousand feet than like late June. He could see

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his breath. Weird. Russia was supposed to be different, not another world. He took a quick look at the wheel caught in the ditch, deciding it would be damned hard to get out. Newboy stood map in hand, stamping his feet to keep warm. "Maybe it's winter in this part of the world."

Valentine snorted, "Like in Australia?" Flakes of snow drifted down. "Look. This isn't Australia. Or Arkansas. Let's take your map into town and find out what part of Russia we are in."

"No need." Newboy nodded toward the ruined town. "Here come the doughnut dollies." Valentine turned to see a procession emerging from the breach in the town wall carrying banners and tall crosses, chanting in unison. Old bearded priests led the parade, wearing long white shifts over loose trousers stuffed into cloth leggings. Behind them came women in flowing dresses, their hair covered in kerchiefs, or done in a single long braid tied with ribbons. Gunners in the waist shouted and whistled.

Valentine motioned to shut them up. This was not going to be easy. He didn't see any Red Army officers. Or anyone that looked like a commissar. Behind the women came children.

Stopping a dozen or so paces in front of him, the priests knelt down in the snow, holding up crosses and icons, swinging smoking censers and chanting at the top of their lungs. The women knelt as well. So did the kids. Some rough-looking cavalry rode up behind them, lancers on wiry little ponies.

Newboy had his phrase book open, and drawled out, "Pree-vy-et." According to Anna that meant, "Hi."

Throwing their arms in the air, the crowd wept and cheered. Way more enthusiasm than that bit of Texas-accented Russian called for. Blue-coated cavalry behind them rode closer. Unbelievably, they seemed armed with bows.

Encouraged by their enthusiasm, Newboy tried another word, "Gd-y-eh?" He pointed at the ground, drawling out the word again, trying to ask where they were.

More cheers. Louder this time. As the commotion grew, the bow-armed cavalry drifted closer. Suddenly, women were screaming, getting up and starting to run, hauling children behind them.

Machine-gun fire broke out behind Valentine, booming unbelievably loud in the frigid air. He spun about. Chief Chisholm had opened fire over the heads of the crowd.

Pandemonium followed. The mob of Russians ran screaming in a dozen directions. Valentine scrambled back into the cockpit. Seizing Chisholm by the legs, he half-pulled him out of the turret, shouting, "What the hell are you doing?"

"They were shooting the women!" Chisholm shouted back.

"Who were?"

"Those bluecoat bowmen on horseback!"

Valentine looked and saw several women lying feathered with arrows, along with a couple of dead cavalrymen. Newboy and Bader were running toward the carnage carrying a medical kit.

Seeing events spiraling out of control, Valentine insisted on no more firing without his orders. He hastily dropped back down to the nose, and then to the ground, sprinting over to where Newboy and Bader knelt beside the bodies. It was ghastly. Worse than anything he had seen in the air war. Three women were dead. The fourth, a girl in her teens, lay sobbing with an arrow through her hip. Bader snapped the arrow off and began working the

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shaft out of the girl's leg, while Newboy held her hand, frantically thumbing his phrase book, telling her to be calm. Fine advice when you have been skewered by a bowman, and are being operated on by a stranger best trained as a bombardier.

Feeling squeamish, Valentine strolled over to look at the dead cavalrymen. They wore blue tunics and trousers, and breastplates made of lacquered leather strips, plus leather helmets and wicker shields. None of these being proof against .50 caliber bullets. They looked more Chinese than Russian—and certainly were not German. Two tough little guys who were now very much dead. Unfortunately, they had ten thousand or so buddies camped nearby. But so far, no guns. All the shots came from *Shady Lady*.

He returned to find that Bader had the arrow out—the weekend fisherman knew all about barbed points. A couple of gunners helped carry the girl to the plane. She had pretty blue eyes, and a long blonde braid that dragged on the ground as they carried her. More cavalry came up, keeping a respectful distance. Crosses, banners, and incense pots littered the ground. Valentine picked up a fine fur cap that looked to be sable. He waved at the assembling horsemen, telling the gunners, "Don't let them get too close."

"Can we shoot them?" Sheepdip shouted from the waist.

"Only if you have to." He did not relish taking on an entire cavalry division. Especially a Russian one. Or maybe Chinese. Either way, they were supposed to be allies.

Valentine climbed back aboard the plane. The wounded girl lay in the waist compartment with her dress torn up to her neatly bandaged hip, staring wide-eyed at the airplane around her. "She's Russian," Newboy announced proudly.

She looked gravely at the Texan, saying, "Da, Rooska-ya."

"See. Her name's Sonya."

"Da, Sonya," she whispered.

"Does she know where we are?" Valentine asked.

"Darned if I know," his navigator admitted.

"Ask her what time it is."

Newboy consulted his book. "Ka-tor-i Ch-as?"

She looked at them. "Ootra."

"She says it's morning."

A burst of gunfire came from the back of the plane. He scrambled back to see what Jack Dog was shooting at. A couple of dozen cavalrymen had cantered up to the tail—but Jack Dog had driven them off, without actually killing any of them. Valentine complimented his initiative, ignoring the dog-eared copy of *Lady Chatterley'es Lover* propped atop the twin .50s.

Settling back into the waist, he wondered what to do next. He was totally lost, stuck in a frozen ditch in some incredibly hick part of Russia, with no radio, and damn small sign of a telephone. To top it off, he badly longed for Anna, missing her touch, her smell, and the intensity of their talk. He listened as Newboy went over his map with Sonya, reading off names of towns in Texican—hoping one would sound familiar to her—having a fine time getting absolutely nowhere. Outside, it seemed like morning—a cold winter morning with the sun low in the sky, and snow on the ground—but at noon they had been nearing Warsaw. He looked at his watch, which he no longer trusted. It sure as hell was not 3:55 on a June afternoon.

"Captain," Sheepdip called to him. "You better come see this. Looks like they're surrendering."

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Glancing out the waist window he saw more riders, one with a white flag. Valentine pushed open the waist door, and dropped to the ground. Motioning for the gunners to hold their fire, he walked slowly toward the knot of riders. White flag held aloft, the lead horseman cantered forward to meet him halfway—no little bowman in lacquered leather, this was a knight in chain mail armor, with a helmet and shield, and a black Teutonic cross on his white surcoat. FRANTIC had taken another far-out turn. "Careful, Captain," Sheepdip shouted, "he's got on a Nazi cross."

Valentine waved for silence, doubting that Sir Galahad was part of some panzer division. He treated the knight to his best phrase book greeting, "Pree-vy-et."

Lifting his visor, the smiling, clean-shaven knight gave him a hearty, "Hello to you, too."

"You speak English?" Valentine was surprised, but relieved.

"Better than you speak Russian." He dipped his truce flag in salute. "Sir Guy von Koenigsberg, Landmeister of the Teutonic Knights of Saint Mary's Hospital in Jerusalem, at your service."

"Captain Frank Valentine. Can you tell me where we are?"

"Certainly," replied the mounted knight, "this is the Princedom of Volynia, part of the Khanate of the Golden Horde. Or it will be, once things around here get sorted out."

None of that sounded like Stalin's Russia. Valentine asked cautiously, "What day is this?"

"31st October, 1241." Halloween. That explained the costumes, but 1241 was a bit of a stretch. "Confused, aren't you?" asked the knight politely. "I can understand."

"Glad to hear it, because *I* sure cannot!"

Landmeister von Koenigsberg looked *Shady Lady* over from atop his mail-clad charger. "You appear to be from the late pre-Atomic. And you speak American English. Which would make you U.S. Air Force, if I am not much mistaken."

"Army Air Corps," Valentine corrected him.

"World War I then?"

"That was daddy's war. World War II."

"Well, congratulations," the Landmeister laughed. "You are going to win it!"

"So where are *you* from?" Sir Guy did not sound like he came from around here either. "This is a long way from Saint Mary's in Jerusalem."

Sir Guy smiled, "I am from what you would call the future." He lifted his arms to show off his armor. "This is a disguise. I am not really a Teutonic Knight, but these Mongols do not know the difference. They are smart, but not that smart."

"What part of the future?"

"A faraway part," Sir Guy replied airily. "Twenty thousand years from now."

Valentine whistled. "What in Hell are you doing *here?*"

Sir Guy laughed again, "Looking for you."

"Really?" Valentine found that hard to swallow. Why would a knight claiming to be from the future be looking for him?

"Or someone like you," the armored Landmeister explained. "We are closing an illegal space-time portal into this period. The portal was opened in midair to minimize spontaneous transmissions, but conscience still de-

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mands that we search for any innocents that might have stumbled through it. Before cutting off their return. You seem like likely candidates."

"We're as innocent as they come," Valentine assured him. "Can you get us back home?" He was willing to believe they were somewhere far away, and he hoped Sir Guy could get them back.

"Absolutely!" Sir Guy sounded comfortingly certain. "Sending you home is my job; this Landmeister thing is just a bit I do to fool the Mongols. But first you must meet Batu Khan."

"What if I don't want to see him?" Valentine had never met a real Mongol khan before, and wanted to keep it that way.

"You will." Letting go of his reins, he reached into a saddle bag and pulled out something that glistened in the morning sun, handing it to Valentine. It was Anna's helmet and goggles.

"Some of Batu Khan's light cavalry picked this up less than an hour ago," Sir Guy explained, "along with the blonde woman who wore it. Am I right in guessing she goes with this plane?"

Valentine clutched the helmet and goggles, asking, "Is she all right?"

"That would be up to Batu Khan. If we want to have any say in the matter, we need to put our case to him."

"How far off is this Batu Khan?"

"Not far. You flew over his *tumen* on the way in. Creating quite a stir," Sir Guy added. "Ordinarily these Mongols are totally fearless—but giant silver birds dropping unannounced out of the clouds can put them in a fine panic."

"Let's hope so." Valentine eyed the Mongols lounging on their horses just out of machine-gun range—having quickly learned how close they could get. They did not look like they would stay scared for long.

"And bring presents," Sir Guy told him as he turned to go. "Batu is a grandson of Genghis Khan—he'll expect presents."

Valentine nodded; when he got back to the plane, LeForge asked, "What's Lancelot got to say?"

"A lot," Valentine admitted. "His name is Guy von Koenigsberg. . . ."

"*Told* you he was a kraut!" Sheepdip declared triumphantly.

For once Sheepdip was right. "But he is a kraut from the future," Valentine told them. "We are all from the future." He explained as best he could, telling his crew how they had flown through an "illegal" space-time portal, and landed in 1241. Newboy was pleased to hear that they were indeed in Russia, even if his navigation was seven hundred years off.

"Do you believe him?" Bader asked.

"Guess so," Valentine shrugged. "We are not where we should be, and every explanation I can come up with is just as dumb."

"Seems right," Bader agreed. "I mean look at it—this place barely makes the Middle Ages."

"But can this Sir Guy get us home?" Newboy did not want the job of navigating them back to 1944.

"Says he can," Valentine told them. "In fact, he seems pretty sure of it. Only first we got to pull a little recon patrol." He picked Bader and Silverman to go with him—if worst came to worst *Shady Lady* no longer needed a bombardier, or a radio man. And Jack Dog.

"Why me?" asked the boy as he dropped out of the tail hatch. Without bombs or a radio, Bader and Silverman were clearly surplus—but the plane could still use a tail gunner.

"Because you have a literary bent." Valentine told him to get an extra flak

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jacket. "This could be something to write about." Jack Dog fetched the flak jacket, seeing he was going to have to pay for reading D.H. Lawrence between dogfights. Valentine made sure they each had a .45, for all the good it would do, surrounded by ten thousand Mongols. He guessed there were only a couple of thousand rounds left for *Shady Lady*'s machine guns—luckily, the Mongols didn't know that. Ransacking the FRANTIC escape kits, he found presents fit for a khan.

Then they set out, following Sir Guy on foot, across cold fields, cut by frozen gullies edged with gray gaunt trees. Mounted Mongols flanked them at a respectful distance. "You must listen to what I say," Sir Guy warned, "and obey me absolutely. Batu Khan can be very touchy. Last spring two of Batu's flanking *tumens* swept through eastern Germany, and Duke Henry of Silesia raised an army to oppose them. Knights from as far off as Poland and France rallied to his aid—but when Batu's horsemen were done with him, they had to identify Duke Henry by the shape of his toes."

Two miles to Batu Khan's tent was a bit of a walk wearing heavy flak jackets, but no one complained at the weight. What Valentine thought was a Cossack division was really a Mongol *ordu,* a great bustling tent city, crammed with Mongols, Tartars, Kipchaks, slaves, children, horses, dogs, and pack animals, smelling like a spice-bazaar-cum-barnyard. Fifty camels loaded with silk and frankincense stood outside the Khan's white linen tent, along with a string of Arab mares, wearing enough bullion to start a bank. No wonder Sir Guy called it the Golden Horde.

Dismounting, the phony Landmeister led them to the ritual entrance of Batu Khan's tent, walking between two bonfires meant "to scare the demons out of you." They knelt three times at the tent entrance, and were searched for weapons. Camp police armed with clubs, bows, and blunted arrows took their knives, but not their .45 automatics. Sir Guy warned them not to touch the tent lines, nor the wooden threshold. Valentine obeyed, stepping directly onto priceless carpets spread on bare steppe, flanked by Bader and Silverman, with Jack Dog as tail gun.

Batu Khan sat on a raised dais; with Anna at his side, dressed like a blonde Mongol princess in a long sweeping blue silk gown, trimmed in green, with a matching jade headdress. Valentine's heart lifted as soon as he saw her, coolly sitting amid a great mob of greasy Mongol courtiers in silks and furs, who smelled of sweat and sour milk. Seeing her again was the one good angle to this mad Mongolian adventure. When she slipped through his fingers in the bomb bay, he had counted her gone for good. Suddenly, he had a miraculous second chance to save her.

So he did his damnedest to please Batu Khan, bowing low and offering up gifts, starting with the hand compasses from their FRANTIC emergency packs. Sir Guy said that the Mongols had compasses, but not like these, with shock-proof cases, movable bearing indicators, and minute gradations. Even Batu looked impressed.

Valentine followed it up with something even more impressive, his wristwatch. This was like nothing the Mongols had ever seen, and Sir Guy spent a long time explaining its workings. They were fascinated by the tiny sweep hand, and by digits that glowed in the dark—but best of all they liked that the watch could be set for any time they wanted. Telling the hour had never been a problem to the Mongols—they had the sun and stars for that. What fascinated them was that the watch could be set for noon local time, and then they could tell how far they had gone east or west by how much the

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watch differed from the sun. Batu's empire stretched from the Danube to the Ural, making it the biggest nation in Europe. And Batu had only just arrived. His homeland was four thousand miles away in Central Asia. People whose conquests were best measured not in miles, but in degrees of longitude, understood the immensity of distance.

Seeing how happy they were, Valentine gave them Silverman's watch as well, along with the extra flak jacket he made Jack Dog fetch from the plane. He kept looking out the corner of his eye at Anna, trying not to smile, or show they knew each other. But Batu was no fool—even on short acquaintance, he knew the round-eyes well enough to be owning half the continent. When Batu asked what in all his paltry kingdom could compare with these marvels, Sir Guy replied, "We want just one woman."

"One woman?" Batu sounded amazed that they had not asked for a hundred. "Which woman?"

Sir Guy indicated Anna. "That woman, Great Kahn."

Batu did a double take, as if seeing Anna for the first time. "This woman?"

Sir Guy said that was her.

"Is it her yellow hair?" Batu Khan ran his fingers through her hair, between the headdress and the nape of her neck. "Yellow-haired women are very popular right now. All my *noyans* own at least a dozen."

Sir Guy assured him that they only wanted this one.

"Then you shall have her." Batu Khan ordered his guests served from a silver table at the tent entrance. Lackeys brought them gold cups full of white liquid.

Valentine asked Sir Guy what it was. "*Kumiz,*" the knight told him, "and probably not poisoned. Try it."

"Poisoned?" Valentine stopped with the cup at his lips, looking over the gold rim at Sir Guy.

"Mongols are poisoners," Sir Guy told him, taking a swig from his own gold cup. "Tartars are too. But if Batu wanted you dead, he would just kill you."

Kumiz had a kick to it, like mixing sweet white wine and Dr. Pepper. When they finished drinking, Mongols politely applauded. "What is it made from?" asked Valentine.

Sir Guy smiled, "Fermented mare's milk."

"Glad you didn't tell me." Valentine passed out Hershey bars in reply. Which were a big hit, especially among the women. Almost as much as the watch.

Batu said their woman would be delivered in a day or two, "When she has been bathed and properly dressed." Valentine dearly wanted to take her "as is"—in fact she looked very fetching in her blue silk and jade headdress—but Batu would not have it. So they trudged back to *Shady Lady* in their heavy flak suits, empty-handed but hopeful.

Everyone waiting at the plane demanded to know, "How did things go with Ming the Merciless?"

"Bang on," Valentine told his crew. "I think it was the Hershey bars."

"No," Sir Guy corrected him, "Batu Khan wants you gone. You and your Hershey bars. This big fire-spitting silver bird makes Batu uncomfortable, and gives the locals hope. I reminded him that the woman fell from the sky, and said you would not return to the sky unless you had her. Until then you would sit here siding with the Russians—who are her people. Batu was relieved when you asked for the woman, showing you have human wants. You could just as easily have told Batu he had to become an Orthodox Christian, or go home to Karakorum."

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Valentine asked, "How do you get on so well with Batu Khan?"

Sir Guy shrugged his armored shoulders. "I am investigating rare Kievan artifacts flooding the antiquities market thousands of years hence. Such sudden appearances are the surest sign of an illegal space-time portal. Often you can tell when and where the portal was opened just by what artwork shows up. Once we found the portal, conscience dictated that we comb the area for anyone who might have come through. Getting these Mongols to do it was the most efficient way, so I presented Batu with gifts from the future—maps from satellite photos, that sort of thing. Happy to have me around, Batu gladly promised to tell me if anyone just fell out of nowhere."

Despite the delay in turning over Anna, Batu Khan showed every sign of wanting them gone, sending slave laborers to level off the makeshift runway and lift *Shady Lady*'s right wheel out of the ditch. Local Russians treated them like they fell from Heaven, bringing food and presents to the delight of his crew. Women cooked their meals, washed their clothes, and otherwise saw to the crew's needs—showing their heartfelt thanks for help against the Mongols. Valentine thought of his first crew, missing over the Pacific. Had they flown through a hole in time too? Maybe they were lying in some lost island paradise, being hand fed coconut milk by Polynesian maidens. He hoped so.

Batu made a big deal of handing Anna over, dressing her in crimson and gold, with two hundred light cavalry and a *noyan* in silver armor to escort her to the plane—putting the best face on giving her up. Trading one Russian woman for a whole city full was the sort of logic the Khan of the Golden Horde could appreciate, especially when it rid Batu of troublesome guests. Leaving her honor guard at machine gun range, she walked happily to the plane. Meeting her halfway, Valentine took her into his arms, not caring that his crew was watching, plus a couple of hundred Mongols. "God, I have missed you," he told her. "I wish he had given you over the moment I saw you in that tent."

She smiled back, "So do I."

Pulling her closer, he sighed, "I suppose Batu made us wait two days just to show us he was still Khan."

"No," she laid her blonde head on his shoulder. "He made you wait two days because he wanted to sleep with me. Twice."

"Sleep with you?" Valentine was continually surprised by Anna's ability to calmly say the most disconcerting things.

"Yes," Anna nodded. "Is that not how to say it? Or is it sleep on you? Whatever you call it, Batu Khan claimed never to have done it before with a woman who had fallen from the sky . He did not want to miss the chance."

"And did you?" Valentine asked.

"Of course," she whispered. "I was not given much choice. Batu had another Russian woman there to translate, telling me what he wanted—just a girl really, barely into her teens but smart, pretty, and very good with languages. First thing she said was that they would kill her in front of me if I resisted." Batu Khan thought of everything, not having conquered half of Europe just to be turned down.

Sir Guy cantered up to congratulate them. "Now that you are all back together, I can guide you through the portal—for a short tour of the future."

Valentine had hoped they could go home at once. "Some of us just can't wait to get back to World War II."

Sir Guy said he was sorry. "Finding you here shows there must be an illegal portal open in the late pre-atomic as well. We have to know exact times

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and places—I cannot even send you back until we know more about where you come from."

The Russians wept when it came time to leave, singing sad dirges as they swung the plane around for take-off. Sir Guy took Newboy's place, giving Bader exact coordinates for the midair portal. With Anna standing behind him, intent on learning the controls, Valentine bounced the B-17 down the makeshift runway, wrestling her into the air, then giving over control to Bader in the nose. *Shady Lady* shot forward, headed into the far, far future. All Valentine could do was sit back, Anna's hands on his shoulders, watching twin control yokes turn themselves.

This Time the Dream's on Me

The future had no airports, or damned few at least. Fortunately, the roads were empty. Heavy production facilities had long concrete strips for moving objects too bulky for standard speed-of-light gates. Valentine saw gleaming irregular polygons scattered about the Ukrainian steppe, with strips of concrete connecting them. He set *Shady Lady* down on one strip, and her engines coughed out on their own—no more gas. Anna was at his shoulder, still wearing her crimson gown, eager to see her country's future. "Where is everybody?" she asked. Aside from the weird buildings, the future looked awfully deserted.

Suddenly, people poured out of buildings, swarming down the concrete strips toward them, more people than the buildings could possibly have contained. Static fences sprang up to protect *Shady Lady* from the crush. Crowds spilled out onto the steppe, growing into the tens of thousands, kept back by the invisible fences. Like the crowds that turned out for Lindbergh at Le Bourget, only in broad daylight and ten times as big. "Answer your question?" Valentine asked.

"Where did they come from?" Anna wondered, staring at so many excited faces.

"Flash crowd," Sir Guy explained. "Instant communication and speed-of-light gates allow anyone on the planet—and in nearer parts of the solar system—to personally participate in major events. Cross-country marathons. Solar eclipses. Volcanic eruptions. That sort of thing. Spontaneous space-time transmissions are rarely this public. We have been tracked since the moment we exited the portal, and millions upon millions of people have been waiting for us to land."

"Thanks for not telling me." Valentine sank back into his seat, taking Anna's hand, which felt warm and excited. She was thrilled at their reception, seeing the future finally living up to her expectations.

"Bandit! Eleven o'clock high." Chisholm's turret turned behind him. "That damned disk. It followed us into the future."

"Don't shoot!" Valentine shouted. "Don't anyone fire!" He saw it too. Coming right at them, a bluish metal disk like the one at Schweinfurt and at the portal. Passing over the static fences, the disk came straight down, deposited a large upright open rectangle on the concrete, then shot off straight upward. Two men stepped out of the rectangle.

Sir Guy looked white as his surcoat, never having supposed anyone might fire on a speed-of-light gate being delivered. "They are from the Hyperlight Institute, try not to shoot them."

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"No wonder they don't need airports," Valentine whispered, holding onto Anna's hand, glad not to be facing the future alone.

"Hello, Captain Valentine," one of the men from Hyperlight called out. "Welcome to the twenty-first millennium. We have a reception waiting for you in Manhattan. Refreshments, and a bit of debriefing, if you don't mind." He was handsome, everyone from the future seemed to be sleek and superbly cared-for, with perfect smiles and perfect teeth. More Hollywood than ever.

Beautiful people cheered and called to them as they dropped one by one out of the plane. He could face Batu Khan with just Bader, Silverman, and Jack Dog—but this was different. Here he wanted the whole crew together; this happy-go-lucky throng scared him a hell of a lot more than the Golden Horde.

Crewmen waved to their new fans—getting wild cheers in return—as handsome men from Hyperlight led them to the rectangular speed-of-light gate. Sir Guy had told him about these gates; Valentine could go almost anywhere on the planet by passing through the gate, and always be only a step away from the plane. These people really didn't need airports.

Valentine stepped through, right after Anna, finding himself at the Hyperlight Institute in Manhattan, a transparent cube overlooking what once was 5th Avenue, but was now a broad green stripe of trees stretching up toward Central Park. It had been afternoon in the Ukraine, so it was earlier that morning in Manhattan. Historic skyscrapers glittered in dawn light, soaring above huge holodomes and hanging gardens, separated by more strip parks and promenades. He saw no cars or aircraft. Unless you counted young sky riders with solar-powered wings roosting on the immaculately preserved Chrysler Building. Spooky.

Folks at the institute put out a sensational spread—for those who liked to breakfast on krill cakes, mushroom omelets, and roast tofu teriyaki. Treating Valentine like a combination gold mine and ghost from the past, they made a fuss about pinpointing the portal, which really did not have much to do with him. Newboy was there with all his charts, and Bader had been flying *Shady Lady* from the nose. Valentine was more concerned with the bluish disk that delivered the speed-of-light gate, describing what he had seen over Schweinfurt and the Ukraine. Hyperlight people agreed, saying it sounded like one of theirs. "Most likely a low-power craft, probably armed with weapons from your own time, then traded to your Nazis for stolen works of art."

"Never thought of them as 'my' Nazis," Valentine admitted, unwilling to take responsibility for the entire twentieth century.

"Sorry," one of the pretty women from Hyperlight apologized, "we forget that these old feuds mean more to you. Smuggling rings prefer to open portals during wars and revolutions, offering aid to the losing side—who are usually more desperate, willing to pay a higher price and ask fewer questions."

"While your guys rely on Genghis Khan," Valentine observed.

Smiling happily, she took it as a compliment. "Never hurts to back a winner."

Unless you have qualms about seeing innocents raped and slaughtered. The Russians did it better. After breakfast in Manhattan, Anna was feted in the Kremlin, honored as a heroine from an ancient historic struggle—like Helen of Troy dropping in for a visit. Slavs have long memories, and were

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not so ready to forgive the Nazis, or the Mongols either. Anna had faced both of them, earning her a heartfelt round of thanks.

Best of all, Valentine got to go home with the guest of honor. They were given a palatial suite in a Paris apartment complex, with French room service, and a real bed to make love in—if you call a floating thermal regulated static field "real." Curling up with Anna a couple of feet off the ground turned out to be comfortable, if disconcerting. At least they were alone. He asked how she was finding the future?

"Absolutely wonderful," Anna declared. "I only wish we could stay."

"You could." Valentine had already turned down a visiting faculty position at the American Historical Institute, not to mention numerous proposals of marriage from total strangers—not all of them women.

"But I left two children back in 1944. Children who I have not seen in years." Make that millennia—it was always hard to think of Anna as a mother. "Besides, the war will be over by May, and then . . ."

He put a finger to her lips, saying, "I do not want to know what is going to happen." Detailed historical information was instantly available—including all surviving twentieth century service records—but Valentine had done his best not to find out too much. He wanted to face his personal future fresh, without knowing what was coming. Valentine had asked if any of his original crew from the Pacific ever turned up alive—hoping they too might have flown through a hole in time. The answer came back—still MIA. He took that as a sign that the future was not going to tell him anything he really wanted to hear.

She shook her head. "You are missing out on so very much. Unbelievable things are going to happen after the war. Space flights and talking appliances. And we will be free, no longer forced to fight. I will not be in uniform a day longer than needed."

"Me neither." Valentine kissed her to keep from hearing any more, by far his favorite way of shutting up a superior officer. If only all majors were silenced so easily.

He was right not to waste time. Within hours, Hyperlight Institute announced that the illegal space-time portal had been located, and would be shut down at once. If they wanted to go back, it must be now. Sir Guy appeared in their Paris suite to say that *Shady Lady* had been repaired, refueled, and rearmed. No longer in armor, but still wearing his white silk surcoat and black Teutonic cross, Sir Guy told them, "Everything is set for you to go back—and the portal is being held open—unless you choose to stay."

Valentine said he was going back. "But what about the disk?"

Sir Guy shrugged. "As we suspected, it is from our period, and improperly traded for plundered art—gothic miniatures and impressionist paintings, practically priceless given their antiquity. Knowing the source, we were able to trace the artwork, apprehending the people who opened the portal. A rousing success all around, as you would say."

"And the disk?" Valentine prompted the knight.

"It is back in 1944. Or rather it was back there," Sir Guy corrected himself. "Neither the flying disk nor the twentieth century actually exist anymore."

"So you are not going to go back and get it?"

Sir Guy looked puzzled. "Whatever for?"

"To keep it from being used by the Nazis," Valentine suggested.

"Seems a little late for that," Sir Guy observed. "We are closing the portal, so there will be no more disks sent back. No more weapons for artwork."

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"But the one that is back there is already doing damage."

"Perhaps," Sir Guy admitted. "But one advanced weapon will hardly tip the balance. You will still win World War II. Believe me, it will barely be noticed amid the carnage."

Unless that "advanced weapon" is aimed at *you*. To them, the past was gone, not to be worried about—dead issues, decided long ago. Giving aid to Hitler was no worse than giving maps to Batu Khan. All they cared about was closing the unauthorized door into their own time—the leak that let in smuggled icons, impressionist paintings, *Shady Lady,* and Lord knows what else. Valentine was glad to be going home. He'd had his fill of the future.

LeForge and Sheepdip were staying. No one could talk them out of it. From what they had seen, the second half of the twentieth century would not be near as good as this. And neither of them had girlfriends at home, or anyone else who would miss them much.

With LeFrog gone, Anna sat in the right-hand seat, learning the controls—she had thousands of flying hours, but all of them in wood and fabric biplanes. Valentine could see she ached to fly the big four-engine beast. Static fences lined the concrete strip, keeping the crowds back. Even more people came to see them off, proving they had been a hit with the future. Some folks were easily amused.

Sir Guy called up from the edge of the strip, "Bit of parting advice—do not land at Poltava if you can help it. Use an outlying field."

Valentine shouted back, "Why?"

Sir Guy waved to him. "You'll see."

His inboard engine boomed into life, cutting short the conversation. They were on their own—just don't land at Poltava. He took his time, going over everything with Anna, quizzing her on the controls. These last few minutes in the twenty-first millennium were free time—no matter how long they took to leave, they would get home at the same time. Taking off together, he let Anna fly solo, getting a feel for the ship, then she turned over control to Bader in the nose—actually to a tiny transponder wired into the bombsight that would guide them through the portal, then shut it behind them.

Valentine burst back into June 30, 1944, a half-hour ahead of himself. Finding that there was some give in the return time, he'd decided that the safest thing was to arrive thirty minutes before he left. *Shady Lady* popped out of midair a hundred miles and half an hour ahead of the bomber stream—hopefully taking *Luftwaffe* defenses by surprise. Every interceptor, including the disk from the future, would be scrambling to face the oncoming juggernaut, not looking for a lone bomber speeding into Russian territory. For the next half-hour, there would be two *Shady Ladys,* and two Valentines. Not such a bad thing. One Valentine would be dropping down out of formation in a damaged *Shady Lady,* drawing the disk to him, before disappearing into the past for his date with Batu Khan. The other Valentine, this Valentine—the one he cared about—would be climbing back to rejoin the bomber stream once it crossed into Russian territory. Enough of the future had rubbed off that he thought of the past—even his own past—as expendable. His past self was going through hell back there, thinking he was giving up Anna for good. So what? He'd survived, and Anna was at his side. That was what mattered.

When he ran this plan past Anna, she approved, patting his arm and saying, "We will make it."

Let's hope so. He let her start the climb to altitude, calling to Jack Dog,

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"Put down your book, and look for the bomber stream." Newboy complained that being a half-hour ahead was throwing off all his calculations. Valentine told him, "Just put us in the flight path. When the group catches up with us, you won't have to do any more navigating. Rest of you keep a lookout—but remember, any fighters are most likely Russians. Or even Mustangs. Don't shoot unless I tell you to."

Anna brought the ship up nicely. He grinned at her enthusiasm, "Mustang pilots claim she handles like a barn."

"Hardly." Anna had not been spoiled by high-performance fighters. "This is more speed and power than I ever dreamed of, does she loop and roll as well?"

"Not on your first flight," he warned her—knowing there would be no more flights for her. Presuming they survived, she would go back to flying biplanes for the 46th Guards Regiment, and he would fly *Shady Lady* on to Foggia for the rest of Operation FRANTIC. Then London, and home to America. Once more, the best possible alternative was that they never saw each other again. The only obvious way they could stay together was to die.

Jack Dog reported flak bursts behind them, a sign the bomber stream was passing the front. Valentine told Anna to throttle back, letting the lead box slowly catch up. "Trying to rejoin is always tricky—the Germans use captured Forts to shadow our bomber boxes. We have to let them know who we are first." Folks from the future had fixed their radio, which worked way better and took up a tenth the space.

Billy "BB" Behan, curled in the ball-turret, called over the intercom. "Bandit, six o'clock low, coming up fast."

"Are you sure it's not Russian?" Valentine asked. What would a lone *Luftwaffe* fighter be doing deep in Soviet territory?

"It's that damned disk," BB shot back.

Jack Dog shouted, "I see it too."

Valentine seized the controls. What this lone intruder was doing was gunning for them. When *Shady Lady* disappeared into the past, the disk shifted to them, somehow recognizing this as the same plane. With the disk's tremendous speed, it had not taken long to catch up. Valentine cursed himself for not getting a bigger lead—but he had wanted to stay close to the group, and fighter cover. Anna asked, "What are you doing?"

"We have to turn her. Meet the disk head on." He needed to nullify the disk's high speed. If he flew straight at it, the combined closing speed would be tremendous—leaving the disk no time to shoot. Unless it slowed down, giving his gunners a shot. Personally, he prayed the disk would just flash past. By the time it got turned around, *Shady Lady* might be in among the lead Mustangs.

Anna reached over and squeezed his hand. "We will do it."

He wished he had her confidence. If he could just get back inside the group box, the disk would not dare follow. At Schweinfurt, the disk did not try to close with two heavily beset air divisions—preferring to make its combat début against women in unarmed biplanes. Bringing the big bomber about, he spotted the disk rocketing at them, backed by the staggered dots of the lead bomber box. Valentine tensed in his seat, seeing the disk closing at supersonic speed. At the last instant, he banked hard to keep from flying head-on into each other.

Flame flickered from the disk's nose as it shot past. And everything exploded.

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His left cockpit window came flying at him, followed by blackness, and an insane ringing in his ears. Blinded and deafened, tasting blood in his mouth, and choking on smoke, Valentine felt the cockpit whirling out of control around him. *Shady Lady* was going down in flames, cartwheeling out of the sky, brought down by a high speed firing pass from the disk.

Despite the deaf ringing in his head, he felt a horrifying blast of air and a ghastly banging, like the ship's wings were coming off. His shuddering control yoke turned on its own. Catching a glimmer of light out of his right eye, Valentine looked for LeForge—but LeFrog was not there. Anna sat in his seat, clinging to the copilot's controls. She shouted at him, but it might have been Polish for all he could tell.

"Feather the prop," he croaked, but she stared blankly back at him. Taking one hand off the control yoke, he did it himself, hitting the feather switch on the left inboard engine, then cutting off fuel as well. The ghastly banging subsided.

Blind and deaf on his left side, he could still tell by feel that they had lost the left inboard engine, maybe the outboard one as well, putting *Shady Lady* in a steep burning spin. Which slowly flattened out as Anna got control of the ship. He held off feathering the outboard engine until he could tell if it was still running. Cannon shells must have also blown in his side of the cockpit—so much for the disk not being able to shoot at high speed. "Can you straighten her out?" he shouted.

Anna shook her head violently, yelling back something he could barely make out. His hearing was coming back, but only in one ear. When he tried to level the controls, she fought him, keeping the ship in a downward spiral, headed for a crash. He did not have the strength to wrestle control away from his newfound love, who seemed determined to bore a hole straight into the steppe.

Singing bullets shot through the cockpit. His radio compass blew up right in front of him, shattering into a million pieces. The disk was still firing, scoring direct hits on full deflection despite the insane spin. He stopped fighting Anna for control—level off now, and the disk would blow them apart. Anna was treating the eighteen-ton bomber like her tiny biplane, heading for the deck. Ukrainian steppe whirled up to greet them.

At the last moment, Anna shoved the controls into neutral. Inherently stable—in fact, not built to spin at all—*Shady Lady* leveled off, rattling treetops, her propwash plowing lanes in the standing wheat. Anna hopped the line of trees at the far side of the wheat, diving down into the next little dip, hugging the earth, hiding in the folds of Mother Russia. Knowing the disk would not likely give up, Valentine shouted into the intercom, "Be ready. Bandit, coming in high."

Chisholm's guns opened up as the disk flashed into view, pulling up hard to avoid the hill ahead, whipping through an impossible turn, then starting to climb away. "Bank," Valentine called out, helping Anna bring the nose up, giving more gunners a shot. "Bandit, 3 o'clock high," he shouted. "Hit him now."

Bader and Newboy opened up from the nose; so did Kraut in the waist, throwing out converging lines of tracers. Hits blew pieces off the disappearing disk, tiny black dots tumbling back into the stream of tracers. Downed German fliers described dodging B-17 fire as "a ghastly nightmare, like trying to shower without getting wet." Firing stopped as the disk sped out of range, headed straight up. Valentine hoped it never came back.

He got his wish. About three thousand feet above them, the disk blew en-

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tirely apart. Leaving just a gray splotch in the sky, a fist-sized cloud rained debris down onto the steppe.

Keeping her nose up, Valentine dragged *Shady Lady* out of the nap of the earth, seeing no sense in crashing now that they were free. Then he sank back into his seat, letting Anna fly the ship. She was as good a pilot as she claimed, handling the big bomber with authority, seeming to know just what was needed.

Gingerly he took off his gloves, shattered goggles, and oxygen mask, feeling the left side of his face, finding a hole in his flying helmet, and a bloody gash along his scalp line that hurt like hell to touch. But the bone beneath felt solid, and when he wiped blood out of his left eye, he could see again. Hearing was another matter. His left ear was totally blown; he could only hear the laboring port engine by turning his head.

"How are you?" Anna asked.

"I will live." Unless he was hit somewhere he could not even feel. Yet.

"Told you so," she smiled happily. For once, her side had won. She had destroyed the dreaded disk, and had not had to give up her life. Unimaginable luck. Chalk up one for the women of Russia, and the 46th Guards Air Regiment.

With one engine feathered, and another limping, *Shady Lady* had no hope of rejoining the group, or making Poltava. Anna found an airfield, identifying herself to astonished ground controllers. Valentine could hear their surprise—even in Russian, on only one ear. They had never seen an American bomber before, much less one flown by a Soviet major. But she got things neatly sorted out, and they landed the ship. Third time's the charm, thought Valentine as *Shady Lady* rolled to a stop—in the twentieth century at last.

Before the props stopped spinning, Anna was out of her seat, examining his wounds. Assured that he was more or less whole, she sat on his hip, wiping blood off his face, and giving him little kisses on the lips. Basking in her bedside manner, he heard his crew calling, "Hey, Ivan," to the Russians. "Damned glad to see you. How's your Uncle Joe?"

He looked up at Anna, cradling his head in her hands, carefully cleaning bits of glass out of his cuts. His head hurt horribly, and his crisp cleaned-in-the-future flight suit was soupy with sweat. "Guess this is going to be good-bye," he told her. Not right now, but soon.

"No, silly," she shook her head and kissed him. "Not good-bye, but *au revoir*."

"When will we see each other again?" He was going home. While she was going back to being Major Yevdokia Anasova of the 46th Guards Regiment.

"After the war." She sounded so certain. "When I have my children back."

Anna with children, that would be worth seeing. "Really? How can you be so sure?"

She kissed him again. "You forget, I saw the future. This time next year, you will be a stepfather, successfully applying for a war bride visa—according to your well-preserved service records."

Oh really? For the first time in a long while, Valentine had something to look forward to. In fact, a beautiful future stretched ahead of him, or so Anna said. And that night the *Luftwaffe* plastered Poltava in a horrific surprise raid, proving that Sir Guy von Koenigsberg—sometime Landmeister of the Teutonic Knights—did truly care about them. O

—For Jack Dog, 94th Group, Bury Saint Edmunds, thirteen missions, "Overpaid, oversexed, and over here."

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ON BOOKS

Norman Spinrad

AFTER SCIENCE FICTION

TALES OF OLD EARTH
by Michael Swanwick
Frog, Ltd., $25.00

JOE'S LIVER
by Paul Di Filippo
Cambrian Publications, $40.00 (ltd. edition)

HABITUS
by James Flint
St. Martin's Press, $26.95

THE STARGATE CONSPIRACY
by Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince
Little Brown, UK, £18.99

Of late, something has been pointed out in certain non-SF circles that on first reading seems patently false, but upon considered reflection appears to be all too true. Namely, that the last three quarters of the twentieth century saw less technologically based revolution in the lives of ordinary people than the previous seventy-five years, that our grandparents lived through much more thoroughly "science fictional" times than we have.

That the pace of scientific and technological change, rather than accelerating through the span of the twentieth century, actually slowed down.

Say what?

Consider, say, someone born in 1850, who would have reached the age of seventy-five in 1925.

Such a person would have been born before the advent of the telephone, the phonograph, electric lights, radio, the airplane, mass production, subways, the automobile, the theory of relativity, the science of psychology, but would have lived to experience a world mutated beyond recognition by all of them and more.

Now consider someone born in 1925. Between then and the year 2000, television was invented, and jet airplanes, and space satellites, and TV and communications satellites, and antibiotics, and humans set foot on the moon, and toward the end of the century, voilà, computers, the Internet, mobile phones, cloned mammals.

Now admittedly, these latter-day developments were far from trivial, and certainly because of them quotidian life at the cusp of the twenty-first century is far different from what it was in 1925. Imagine life in the twenty-first century without TV and computers and antibiotics and the Internet and jet airliners!

But imagine living without the telephone. Imagine you could simply not talk with anyone not physically present. Imagine that the only ways you could have music in your home was to make it yourself or hire live musicians. Imagine that the only way to travel someplace without a railway station was afoot or on a horse. Imagine cities and towns and homes without electric lighting.

Much more drastic, isn't it?

Well, that *was* what life was like in 1850. And people born in that year lived to see all *that* radically altered by the time they were seventy-five, lived to see a civilization altered far beyond the recognition or for the most part even the wild prediction of those who were seventy-five when *they* were born.

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Whereas most of the real-world wonders circa 1925-2000 were predicted decades in advance of their real-world advent, at least in rough general form, and indeed most of them were predicted in rough general form, by about 1930 or so.

Where?

Where else?

In first-generation science fiction.

Although it wasn't called that or anything like it until Hugo Gernsback coined the term "scientifiction" as a label to slap on the pulp magazine *Amazing Stories,* inventing both the science fiction genre and genre science fiction thereby, in literary and cultural terms, true science fiction was a child of the nineteenth century, not the twentieth.

H.G. Wells and Jules Verne, among less prominent others, were writing science fiction long before Gernsback invented the genre, and indeed, in the beginning, *Amazing* relied fairly heavily on reprints.

Wells and Verne even engaged in a print feud over the proper nature of science fiction long before there were SF magazine letter columns, let alone fanzines, to conduct it in. And it is not much of an exaggeration to say that the basic lines of literary cleavage and dispute within the SF genre, from John W. Campbell, Jr.'s Golden Age on through the post-war renaissance, the New Wave, and the Cyberpunk Movement, were born of the dispute between Wells and Verne over the true nature of the beast, a deep literary faultline still running through what the genre has become today.

For Verne, the raison d'être of science fiction was the usage of existing technology, or at least known science, to predict the course of future technological development, and the story was basically a vehicle for conveying it to the reader.

For Wells, imaginary future technology was basically the McGuffin, the literary given, and the true interest was in exploring what such new technology might do to politics, human psychology, and culture.

Of course they were both right, though they couldn't see it themselves through the polemical fog, for the Vernian and the Wellsian have been the two great streams of science fiction ever since.

And interestingly enough, while neither of them really acknowledged it in such terms and their emphasis was quite different, both Verne and Wells considered science fiction something new under the literary sun at their time—not only a literature with an extra-literary dimension, but a literature in which literary values themselves should be subsumed to the service of that extra-literary mission—technological prediction chez Verne; political, social, and economic extrapolation for Wells, the Fabian socialist.

The point being that both Wells and Verne, the two most influential progenitors of twentieth-century science fiction, were children of the nineteenth century.

They lived through the invention of the telephone and the automobile and sound recordings and the automobile and mass production and the subway and electric light and electric power.

They lived through the creation of the very concept that the technological matrix of culture and economics and politics and daily human existence would be radically different in the future from what it was in the present and at an accelerating pace. They watched it happening.

But they were born and grew to maturity in cultures without a true literature dedicated to the exploration of this ongoing evolution, not merely without a true literature of science fiction, but without a true concept of such a literature.

Obviously they did.

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For together they created it.

In 1925, the situation was quite different.

People born in 1925 were not only born into a culture where the telephone and the phonograph and radio and the airplane and the automobile and motion pictures were common everyday artifacts, they were born into a culture where ongoing and accelerating technological progress was an expectation, a given, where the cultural assumption was that, at least in these Vernian terms, the future was going to be more advanced than the present.

They were also born into a culture where a literature of science fiction had existed for about half a century before Hugo Gernsback coined the ancestor of the term and turned it into pulp.

This was no coincidence. True science fiction arose as the literary response to the radical technologically birthed cultural revolutions of the second half of the nineteenth century, and by the first quarter of the twentieth century science fiction and technological evolution had entered into a positive feedback relationship.

This is why Hugo Gernsback thought he could use the stuff to scientifically educate the masses and sell some magazines in the first place.

This is why most of the technological developments circa 1925–2000—television, trips to the Moon, cheap fast air travel, robots, thinking machines, satellites, whatever—were anticipated in science fiction decades before their real-world advent, and mostly before 1935.

Of course a perusal of back issues of old science fiction magazines quickly reveals that a lot of things were also predicted that have never come into being, indeed that later science went on to prove impossible.

But in a way, that was the Vernian cultural role of science fiction. Unlike scientists, science fiction writers didn't have to be *right,* they only had to be *plausible*; unlike engineers, they didn't have to know how to build anything, only to imagine it. Because they had the freedom to be wrong, they had the freedom to imagine anything that didn't contradict the known science of their day, and because they were free to imagine anything, given enough magazine slots for stories, sooner or later collectively they would imagine pretty much everything.

The existence of this Vernian science fiction and its percolation down into the cultural weltanshauung meant that the children of the last three quarters of the twentieth century grew up in a world in which most technology was imagined before it was created, in which science fiction, in its feedback relationship with science and technology, therefore had a role in calling it into being.

After World War II, Wellsian science fiction became more dominant, culminating, perhaps, in its role in the creation of the Counterculture, and the feedback relationship between the Counterculture and the New Wave.

Everyone knows that rock and roll was the dominant art form of the countercultural revolution of the 1960s, but science fiction was its formative literary influence.

It began quietly with William Burroughs's melding of science fiction and the bohemian lifestyle of the Beats in *Naked Lunch,* the lifestyle that Bob Dylan would turn into a mass lifestyle when he picked up an electric guitar and turned bohemian folk music into rock and roll.

But the three novels most central to the Counterculture—all science fiction—were Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land,* Frank

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Herbert's *Dune,* and, false modesty would leave me critically remiss if I denied it, to a lesser extent, my own *Bug Jack Barron.*

The communal lifestyle championed by Valentine Michael Smith in *Stranger* was the direct template for the hippie communes, and, unfortunately, for the condition terminal thereof, Charlie Manson and his Dune Buggy Death Commandos and their sanguinary discorporations.

Dune, in the person of its messianic (and I have argued elsewhere, tragic) hero, Paul Atreides, convincingly portrayed a boy ultimately transformed into transhumanly evolved prescient and transcendent consciousness by a mind-expanding drug before Timothy Leary preached the psychedelic gospel.

Bug Jack Barron, written later during the apogee of the Counterculture, and written, I am in an authoritative position to say, under the influence of *Stranger, Dune* Leary, the existence of the Counterculture itself, and yes, consciousness-enhancing substances, imagined a kind of one-time countercultural Paul Atreides grown middle-aged, cynical, and showbizzy, confronting down and very dirty near future politics.

This is relevant not just because *Bug Jack Barron* became a politically relevant novel in countercultural circles, but because, unlike *Stranger* or *Dune,* it came out of a feedback relationship with the culture it would in turn influence.

Which in essence *was* the feedback relationship between the New Wave and the Counterculture. Science fiction helped create the Counterculture, and the Counterculture influenced the mutation of science fiction which further influenced the Counterculture. No accident that the New Wave was born in "Swinging London." No surprise that the conflict between the New Wave and the Old Guard within the SF community mirrored the cultural warfare in society at large. The New Wave and the Counterculture were thoroughly embedded in each other.

I said that this was *perhaps* the culmination of the feedback relationship between Wellsian science fiction and cultural evolution, mirroring the feedback relationship between Vernian science fiction and technological evolution, and I do believe this is more or less so.

But the Cyberpunk science fiction of the 1980s was a synthesis of the Vernian and Wellsian streams, of technophilia and the countercultural outlaw sensibility. More central to the current point as the ultimate textbook example, Cyberpunk science fiction created the whole cyber culture as we know it today.

Completely.

Out of whole cloth.

William Gibson and not that many others imagined cyberspace and virtual reality, eventually inspiring computer and software whizzes to create today's primitive versions thereof, and major corporations to market the ass off of them, and here we are with the World Wide Web, and AOL, and Amazon.com, and the dotcom virtual economy we know and do or do not love today.

Today?

What *is* the feedback relationship between *post*-Cyberpunk science fiction and technological and cultural evolution?

Or more properly, *is* there one?

I would contend herein that generally speaking there is not.

I would contend that just as the current visual and musical and to some extent contemporary literary arts are at a loss for a positive and evolutionary label, and so are stuck with "postmodernism" as a pathetic default, so is one at a loss to critically sum up the literary trends within the science fiction of the last decade

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or so as anything other than "post-Cyberpunk," and for all too similar and similarly unfortunate reasons.

Just as so many of the arts have lost their feedback relationship with the spirit of contemporary culture and descended into empty "post-modern" formalism when it comes to the self-declared "high arts" and to showbizized "product" when it comes to "popular culture" designed to sell to "consumers," so has contemporary science fiction lost its feedback relationship with technological and cultural evolution and come to be dominated on a commercial level by schlock so cynical it would make Barnum cringe, and on a literary level by a vague constellation of trends that collectively can only be called "retro."

Bad enough when the present loses a viable esthetic and cultural connection to the art that would speak to and for its current spirit, and perhaps somewhere and sometime else I may discuss the esthetic and emotional bankruptcy of postmodernism.

But such things as science fiction magazines still exist and this is one of them, and far more ominous on a cultural level is a culture's loss of a feedback relationship with the art form that serves to connect it to its future, to ongoing technological and cultural evolution.

While science fiction has gone dominantly retro and lost thereby its positive feedback with technological and cultural evolution, technological evolution has slowed down or at least become less culturally meaningful. Cultural, political, and economic change has become so devolutionary that the very concept of "progress" has become politically incorrect left of center and the center itself has moved somewhere between the Wolves of Wall Street and the Gnomes of Zurich.

We awake in the twenty-first century to find ourselves living in a retro age, in an age that, back when the word could be used in polite company, might justly be deemed "reactionary."

Not so much that science fiction writers have turned reactionary (though there have always been plenty of reactionary science fiction writers around) but in a reactionary political, economic, and social society with a retro esthetic it's damn hard for even the best and most sincere of science fiction writers to maintain a speculative visionary élan.

Even a writer like Michael Swanwick, who is all too exemplary of a first-rate and apparently dedicated science fiction writer constrained to operate under this devolutionary cultural pressure.

In the 1980s and into the early 1990s, Swanwick was in many ways the complete science fiction writer—a fine stylist, scientifically and technologically sophisticated, master of story and character, unafraid of transcendent material, a moral philosopher, a hard-edged visionary.

The culminating masterpiece of this phase of his career was *Vacuum Flowers,* published in 1987, a brilliant and unique vision of a solar-system-wide civilization in which the artificial and human-created have complexified to the point where they have developed their own evolutionary dynamic.

This was the best, the deepest, the most poetic, of the "post-terrestrial civilization" novels of the period; in retrospect, not only the apogee of Swanwick's trajectory along this vector, but the peak of this whole visionary sub-genre.

His next novel, *Griffin's Egg,* was a relatively near-future tale set on the Moon. Then in *Stations of the Tide* he went galactic, forthrightly transcendental, and in a way neo-Shakespearean.

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But then, in the 1990s, he published *The Iron Dragon's Daughter,* a steampunk fantasy set in a sort of alternate pseudo-medieval realm, but industrialized at about a Victorian level.

Then there was *Jack Faust,* another novel along this alternate retro vector, in which the Faust figure begins an industrial and technological age in medieval times, which "progresses" toward an alternate version of "modern times," with disastrous cataclysmic results.

Now don't get me wrong, these are excellent novels, award-winning stuff and deservedly so. But taken together, they do illustrate a turning away from future transcendental visionary extrapolation in the 1990s by one of the foremost practitioners thereof in the 1980s.

To speculate on Swanwick's personal reasons for this alteration of trajectory is a mind-reading act that I don't care to attempt, but it did come at a time when the retro mode was coming into a vogue that has only strengthened since. While writers, particularly science fiction writers, may grapple with the times in which they find themselves, may seek to transcend them, may even succeed, they are still embedded in them; they cannot be entirely immune to the pressures of their cultural surround.

And now, at the turn of the millennium, we have a collection of Swanwick stories, *Tales of Old Earth,* published by Frog, Ltd., a small press—a curious book that raises several curious questions.

The first of which is why are there nowhere in this volume proper copyright notices for the nineteen stories it contains? This is not merely a critical pain in the ass, since it makes it difficult to know or remember the time frame in which they were written, but could conceivably result in future problems for the author.

The second of which is why this collection of short stories by an acknowledged award-winning master thereof has been published by a small press in the first place rather than by a major science fiction publisher. The speculative answers to which are not exactly reassuring when it comes to the commercial survival of short form "SF."

The third of which is the title, *Tales of Old Earth,* peculiar since not all of them are set on Earth, and the majority not in the past. Perhaps the rather hideous cover emphasizing a dinosaur answers that one, since, god help us, "dino SF" has of late become a popular sub-genre. And while this collection is not heavily weighted with this stuff, Swanwick is perhaps its foremost practitioner these days, and the publisher might have felt they would sell more copies if prospective buyers thought that it was.

The stories themselves are dominantly a peculiar sort of fantasy, though there is some science fiction and, yes, a sprinkling of dino SF. What is peculiar and interesting about the sort of fantasy in this book, appearing as it does with the leavening of a certain amount of unabashed science fiction, is that while it takes place in venues like a hell-bound train, the body of a giant grasshopper, detailed fantasy realms sometimes made up out of thin air, and while the laws of unnature operating therein are disconnected from the physical laws of our own universe, it nevertheless somehow has the *feel* of science fiction.

What do I mean by the *feel* of science fiction?

It's not so easy to explain.

The contemporary fantasy of Harlan Ellison sometimes has this feel, when it deals with very contemporary characters who find themselves in fantasy stories but speak and act like urban moderns. Paradoxically,

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his earlier science fiction, unconvincing on an extrapolative level, mostly had the feel of fantasy.

Here the majority of the lead characters in Swanwick's fantasies are fantasy beings for the most part and they are operating in fantasy realms. Yet they act, and think, and talk, as if they are characters in science fiction stories.

It's as if Swanwick is grappling with some elusive interface between science fiction and fantasy in these tales, between what he was writing in the 1980s and what he came to write later, struggling perhaps with the pressures of the retro science fiction of the 1990s by counterposing a strange kind of counter-retro fantasy (and fantasy by its very nature is usually retro) with the *soul* of science fiction.

Or maybe I'm getting a little too mystical here myself. To bring it back down to Earth, to, in fact, the sleazy highways and byways of present day America, consider *Joe's Liver* and the career of its author, Paul Di Filippo.

Di Filippo, as readers of his review column in this magazine surely know, is as critically and passionately committed to the welfare and communal spirit of that elusive something variously called "science fiction" or "SF" or "speculative fiction" as yours truly or anyone else, maybe more so.

And he has written quite a respectable body of short fiction more or less within its parameters himself, most notably, perhaps, those collected in *Ribofunk,* the only book of his to be published as "science fiction" by a regular publisher of "SF."

In some ways, in terms of allegiance of a nebulous sort to that nebulous something called "SF," he is a regular "sci-fi guy" in the odious terminology of Forrest J. Ackermann.

Yet in other ways not. At novel length, he has resisted publication by SF publishers, or perhaps they have resisted publishing him. *Cyphers,* eminently publishable as SF thematically, and for my money one of the two or three best SF novels of the year in which it was published (along with several hundred far less worthy works) was nevertheless published by Cambrian Publications, a small press, and now also the publisher of his latest novel, *Joe's Liver.*

Now *Joe's Liver* (and, by the way, do not expect a reason for this title in the body of the novel) is by no criterion of setting, time, or thematic material remotely "science fiction" or "SF" or even "speculative fiction."

It is the story of Reader's Digest, yes, *Reader's Digest,* an orphan from the Caribbean whose education comes virtually entirely from back issues of the magazine he is named after, who embarks upon a vision quest of sorts, a pilgrimage from his island home through Canada and parts of the northeastern United States to that holy of holies, Pleasantville, NY, where the magazine is published.

Is this a satire?

Well, yes, and a very funny one too.

Is this a latter-day *Candide?*

Well, yes and no.

Reader's Digest is in some ways a naïf and in some ways sophisticated. What he knows about America (at least at the beginning) comes entirely from the magazine, not noted for historical perspective or cultural depth. But he speaks exaggeratedly excellent English, he is smarter than the weirdoes he meets and learns very quickly from his adventures and misadventures, and is, by the way, a puissant cocksman not entirely averse to trading on this skill.

This is not science fiction. It's hard to imagine any science fiction

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line touching *Joe's Liver* with a fork. What it is is a delight, and pure Di Filippo, and maybe that is the essential point.

Maybe it always has been.

Di Filippo, the critic, has been wont to try to tag the label "slipstream" on stuff like this, perhaps because Di Filippo, the "sci-fi guy," has been connected enough to the science fiction community and its subculture—even while his own work has been closer to post-Beat literary bohemia (jeez, there I go doing it myself!)—to have been infected by its compulsion to slap *some kind* of genre label on everything, no doubt as a reaction to the persistence of everyone outside its charmed circle to slap a genre label on *it*.

But it seems to me from a reading of *Tales of Old Earth* and *Joe's Liver* right on top of each other that what unites a writer like Swanwick with a writer like Di Filippo even when they are writing very different things, perhaps *especially* when they are writing very different things, neither of which is science fiction by any coherent definition, that they bring to the work an elusive something, a sensibility, an angle of attack, that is the true essence of science fiction, indeed perhaps even *because* it eludes coherent definition.

You can take the boy out of science fiction, but you can't take the science fiction out of the boy?

Be that as it may, what these two very different books by two very different writers connected to science fiction in very different ways would seem to indicate is that, under the present parlous economic conditions and the present feckless cultural conditions, the best and the brightest rats are, in their diverse ways, trying to escape the sinking ship, taking whatever useful baggage they can with them.

Such is the nature of the catastrophe.

Which is chicken and which egg, which cause, and which effect? Beside the point, perhaps, for there is such a thing as negative feedback as well as positive. And a culture that by whatever mechanism manages to call into being a dominantly retro science fiction saps its own evolutionary élan thereby, and emphatically vice versa.

And as science fiction sinks slowly into the retro tarpits of steampunk and alternate pasts, of recreation of Vernian artifact and self-consciously nostalgic space opera, of libertarian fantasies of the Free Asteroid Belt that were creaky while Ayn Rand was still alive, of *Star Wars* schlock and *Star Trek* schlock and *Schlock Trek* schlock, and perhaps most hideously symptomatic of all, the desecration of *Dune* by Frank Herbert's own son and Kevin Anderson, there are worse things waiting to succeed it.

Much worse.

You think not?

Take *Habitus* by James Flint and *The Stargate Conspiracy* by Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince.

Habitus is a first novel published by St. Martin's as anything but a science fiction novel, and I do mean anything, cover copy calling it everything from "Information Age fiction" to "an enthralling fictional world in the contemporary technological maze" to "a satire of the digital age" to "a commentary on our premillennial condition," anything to avoid mentioning the dreaded initials, let alone "science fiction."

Okay, fair enough, these days anything stuck in the "SF genre" except for media tie-ins, episodes in successful fantasy or, occasionally, science fiction series, and necrophilic channeling acts like *Dune: House Atreides* is going to be pretty much commercially dead in the water.

Under these conditions, a first science fiction novel by an unknown

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writer has a better shot than the twentieth science fiction novel by anyone much less than a brand name like Herbert or Asimov. Better to be unknown to reviewers, marketeers, and computers, than a commercially mid-list science fiction writer with a long and distinguished literary career.

If, that is, your first novel is not published as "science fiction." If it is, that could be the commercial kiss of death not just to your book, but to your entire unborn career, right then and there.

These days, the SF genre is curtains for a literarily ambitious writer who hasn't built a sturdy sales record a decade or so ago when it was still possible, let alone a writer just starting out.

No publisher has as yet worked out a literarily credible collective solution to this dilemma within "SF genre publishing," and they have mostly stopped trying.

These days there are no collective solutions for the writer who wishes to write literarily ambitious science fiction, only individual escape acts, which boil down to having the luck or cleverness never to have been tagged in the long ago, like Michael Crichton, weaseled your way out like Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., and Neal Stephenson and William Gibson (a cyber-something tag being the best current escape hatch), or finding a publisher who will do you as "mainstream" from the very beginning.

So kudos to St. Martin's for trying to break James Flint out before he got sucked in and down. And kudos too to Flint himself, who is indeed a skilled, developed, and even poetic stylist on a sentence and paragraph level, with a fine eye, ear, and nose for telling sensual description, and the ability to create idiosyncratic yet believable characters.

But what sort of story is within this package? To what species of thematic material is this considerable literary puissance applied?

Well, we have a mathematical whiz who comes out of a Hasidic Jewish background and who comes to be obsessed with the mathematical and mystical relationship between the Cabala and certain areas of physics, and the son of a minor Hollywood actress and a high-powered computer executive whose consciousness slips out of time, who is weirdly brainwashed by his shrink, and who is seduced as a tyke by an equally precocious girl who becomes something strange and then becomes a kind of mystical metaphysical gambler.

And these three become a kind of latter-day cyber-New Age transcendental trinity, in a kind of apotheosis that would be a homage to Theodore Sturgeon's *More Than Human* if only Flint had Sturgeon's deep caritas and hard-edged scientific clarity.

And then there is Laika, yes, the very same dog the Soviet Union put into orbit and left there to die decades ago, who has somehow survived by drawing energy from the infosphere, or some such babble, and . . .

Well, you get the idea. . . .

Is *Habitus* science fiction, literarily speaking?

That's a difficult question to answer these days. And that too, unfortunately, is symptomatic, not just of the confusion within science fiction publishing as to the distinction between what is possible and what is not, what is credible intellectual speculation and what is utter bollocks, but, far worse, in the culture at large.

We here at least know that a dog surviving in a space capsule for decades on pseudo-McLuhanistic infosphere ectoplasm *is* utter bollocks, don't we?

Don't we?

We do know that one cannot real-

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ly conjure spirits from the bits and bytes by a mélange of cabalistic sexual magic and computer hardware?

We do know that the laws of probability on a roulette wheel cannot be affected by voodooistic mumbo-jumbo, that becoming one with the reptilian backbrain reality metaphysic will not make us poker or blackjack wizards?

If not, perhaps you'd care to join me in a game of seven-card stud?

Now don't get me wrong, there's nothing wrong with fantasy that *knows* it's fantasy, the aforementioned Swanwick collection being a case in point, and arguably *The Druid King*, the novel I'm currently writing myself.

It's when fantasy and science fiction get thrown into a literary blender by a writer who doesn't understand the difference or just doesn't care that the result becomes literary horseshit and culturally dangerous.

Yes, culturally dangerous, as we shall see shortly, and the better the writer, the more culturally dangerous.

And James Flint is a very good writer on a literary level indeed. Moreover, unlike certain other promulgators of this sort of thing, Alexander Besher, say, he does not appear to be a scientific ignoramus. When the spirit moves him, he can be quite credible on scientific and technological matters, and even on extrapolation therefrom.

But therein lies the danger. Flint is good enough on a literary level to mingle science fictional speculation with pure info-age fantasy and convince many if not most readers that they exist on the same reality level.

This may not be so dangerous in an "SF" novel published as such for hard-core "SF" readers. This has been common in genre SF for about as long as the said genre has existed, and the habituated readers thereof know that sword fights in space opera spaceships, time travel machines, faster-than-light gizmos, and all the rest of it, are part of a literary game.

But the number of such readers is dwindling and genre SF is dying out, as witness surveys showing that the age of the average SF reader is rising and fewer and fewer young people are reading the stuff, not to mention the declining sales figures of science fiction magazines and their recourse to covers that more and more try to evoke nostalgia for the "Golden Age" of the 1930s and 1940s.

And stuff like *Habitus* seems to be what is in the process of replacing it. Two decades of *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* and their commercial cinematic and televised clones, and worse still, *X-Files* and its clones, plus Japanese manga, endless space-sword-and-alien video role-playing and computer games, have long been preparing the way for it.

Thanks to the media of television and motion pictures, of video games and comics, and the advertising industry parasitic upon them, the tropes and imagery, the settings and schticks and clichés of science fiction, have by now been thoroughly assimilated by the culture at large.

But the literary and intellectual core has not.

Or for that matter the prose fiction that takes it seriously.

We are talking here, after all, about a public the majority of which, a recent poll showed, believe that the Air Force is indeed secretly holding the bodies of aliens pulled from the wreck of a flying saucer in Roswell, New Mexico, in Hangar 51. They saw it in a movie and on TV, didn't they? There are people out there who claim to have been visited by the Men in Black, though of course they can't remember why. More people in the United States believe that the Bible presents the

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literal truth of the creation of the universe, the Earth, and all its denizens in a few thousand years, than can give even a coherent outline account of the theory of evolution or the true scale and time-span of the cosmos.

Habitus and similar, if less well-written, novels like it that have been appearing of late, are not packaged as "science fiction" or "SF" because publishers are not trying to market them to the dwindling and aging readership for same, but to a general public that grew up on the trappings of science fiction but knows or cares jack shit about the extrapolative rigor and real-world transcendentalism that is its intellectual raison d'être and esthetic core.

Further, what Flint seems to have grasped better than most, though he certainly isn't the only one, is the literary significance of the Internet mania sweeping through stock markets and popular culture and infotainment on the general public's concept of futuristic chic, perhaps because he was an editor for *Wired UK*.

Namely that the icons of the "futuristic" cultural cutting edge for would-be trendies are no longer spaceships and robots and aliens and other planets but the Web and Cyberspace and Virtual Realities.

Invoke these, and, given a reasonable level of literary skill, you can make almost anything go down as within the realm of the future technological possible, make almost anything parse emotionally and esthetically as "scientific."

This is the sort of thing that is going to replace "science fiction" if current trends are not somehow altered radically.

It will not be called "science fiction" or even "SF." It will not be packaged in the current retro "sci-fi" mode. It will be marketed to the general public. The people who write it will shun the term "science fiction writer" like the commercial and literary plague. The successful ones will make a lot of money.

Curious stuff indeed.

A mishmash of science fiction tropes, schtick, and imagery, with New Age and Cyber-Fantasy, pretending to be a kind of science fiction to the extent of attempting to occupy the cultural function fulfilled by science fiction for most of the twentieth century, but shunning any identification with "science fiction," and, rather than taking up its visionary extrapolative role in a positive feedback relationship with technological and cultural change, sucking it down in a devolutionary spiral.

You think not?

Then consider something like *The Stargate Conspiracy,* and there are plenty of such somethings out there—"New Age" pseudo science fiction masquerading as non-fiction, or worse, much worse, believing that its vibrating mélange of saucer cultism, anti-government paranoia, crackpot Egyptology, Pyramid Power, and the rest of it is a description of hidden realities, rather than fiction.

Whether the writers of this sort of thing are cynical charlatans or sincere loonies doesn't really matter in terms of cultural effect, for either way the stance is that this is not mystical or pseudo-science fictional fantasy, but non-fiction, "Truth" with a great big fat capital "T."

For this is the path to the tarpits of devolution into cultural stasis.

For a century, science fiction and forward-looking, progressive technological and cultural evolution existed in a positive feedback relationship. During that century, science fiction painstakingly evolved literary techniques for imparting verisimilitude to visionary dreams. For a brief shining moment, beginning, perhaps, with the advent of the Counterculture and the Moon Landing, and the Great Science Fiction Boom,

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it seemed that this transcendent vision, this vision of the possibility of transcendence within the physical parameters of the universe in which we find ourselves, a transcendence therefore attainable, had prevailed.

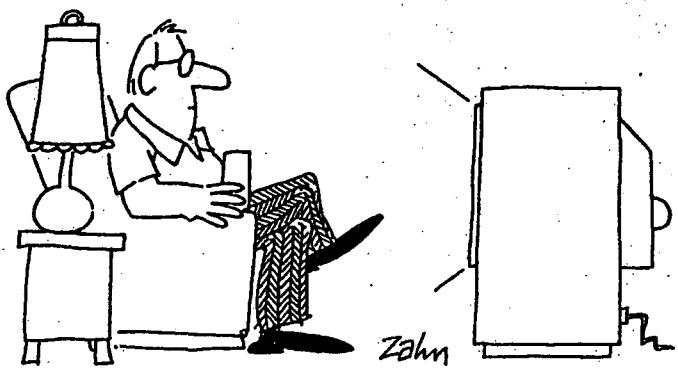
Those were the days, my friends, we thought they'd never end, we'd live forever and a day. . . .

But they did.

And in these latter days, when, as in the words of Jack Vance, "humanity festers, rich as rotting fruit," those very literary techniques have come to serve the dark side of the Force.

After science fiction, le déluge.

Après nous, la merde.○



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SF Conventional Calendar

There's a little something for everyone in the rest of winter; I like Boskone. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs and on how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. - Erwin S. Strauss

JANUARY 2001

25–28—FURther ConFusion. For info, write: **105 Serra Way, Milpitas CA 95035.** Or phone: **(408) 956–8790** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(E–mail) Info@furtherconfusion.org. (Web) www.furtherconfusion.org/about.** Con will be held in: San Mateo CA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Marriott. Guests will include: none announced. Furry fans.

26–28—SuperCon. chair@iname.com. Best Western 5th Av., Rochester MN. Relaxacon. The Superbowl alternative.

26–28—OhayoCon. www.thesoyokaze.net/ohayocon. Airport Sheraton, Cleveland OH. Brady, T. Grant, DeJesus. Anime.

26–28—Creation. (818) 409–0960. New Yorker, New York NY. C. Barker, T. Atkins, D. Winter. Commercial horror con.

FEBRUARY 2001

2–4—SheVaCon. (540) 248–4152. www.shevacon.com. Wyndham, Roanoke VA. Jacobs, L. A. Williams.

2–4—UK Nat'l. Filk Con. www.z9m9z.demon.co.uk/con. Albany Hotel, Eastbourne UK. Tim & A. Walker. SF folksinging.

9–11—CapriCon, Box 60085, Chicago IL 60660. www.capricon.org. Sheraton, Arlington Hts. IL. Allen Steele, G. Sullivan.

9–11—AstronomiCon, Box 1701, Rochester NY 14613. (716) 342–4697. Four Points Sheraton. Steven Barnes, D. Harrod.

10—MinerCon, 1600 Maple, Golden CO 80401. www.mines.edu/stu_life/organ/anime. Parker Center. Anime.

10–11—Trek Celebration, 11916 W. 109th, Overland Park KS 66210. (913) 327–8735. Champaign IL. Commercial event.

11—Invasion, 36 Vicarg. Fld. Shop. Ctr., Ripple Rd., Barking IG11 8DQ, UK. (020) 8521–5357. Library. Sladen, Strickson.

15–18—Left Coast Crime, Box 100382, Anchorage AK 99510. (907) 566–7500. Hilton. Connelly, L. Davis. Mystery fiction.

16–18—Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 625–6311. Sheraton. G. R. R. Martin, Vess, J. Cohen, Coulson.

16–18—VisionCon, Box 1415, Springfield MO 65801. (417) 886–7219. Clarion. J. Schmidt, Elrod, T. Thomas, F. Gorham.

16–18—RadCon, 2527 W. Kennewick Av. #162, Kennewick WA 99336. radcon@neonshadow.net. Seattle. Gregory, Ladd.

16–18—KatsuCon, 4140 Eby Dr., Dumfries VA 22026. (703) 624–6527. Hyatt, Arlington VA. Hernandez, Howard. Anime.

23–25—Ad Astra, Box 7276, Stn. A, Toronto ON M5W 1X9. (905) 305–0827. Don Valley Holiday Inn. C. Willis, D. Hartwell.

23–25—Potlatch, Box 3042, San Ramon CA 94583. potlatch10@yahoo.com. Ramada Plaza, San Francisco. Written SF.

23–25—ConCave, Box 3221, Kingsport TN 37664. grrobe@preferred.com. Mammoth Resort, Park Mammoth KY.

23–25—Gallifrey, Box 3021, N. Hollywood CA 91609. gallifreyone.com. Airtel, Burbank CA. Biggs, B. Trimble. Dr. Who.

23–25—Cavalcade, Chandlers House, Green Ln., Whitby YO22 4EU, UK. www.yorkmpd.demon.co.uk. Pavilion. Costumes.

23–25—Redemption, % Voronov, 25 Kings Meadow View, Wetherby L22 7FX, UK. www.smof.com/redemption. B5 and B7.

24–25—Creation, 100 W. Broadway #1200, Glendale CA 91210. (818) 409–0960. New Yorker, New York NY. Herc & Xena.

MARCH 2001

2–4—ConSonance, 5157 Jarvis Av. #124, Newark CA 94560. rhiannon@arilinn.com. San Francisco CA. SF folksinging.

AUGUST 2001

30–Sep. 3—Millennium PhilCon, Box 310, Huntingdon Valley PA 19006. Philadelphia PA. Bear, Dozois. WorldCon. $160.

AUGUST 2002

29–Sep. 2—ConJose, Box 61363, Sunnyvale CA 94088. conjose@sfsfc.org. San Jose CA. WorldCon. $120.

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NEXT ISSUE

APRIL COVER STORY

Hugo and Nebula-winner **Nancy Kress**, one of the Biggest Names in the business today, returns next month with our lead story for April, a taut and suspenseful new novella that pits one lone woman in a battle of wits against an intruder who has broken into her home and taken her and her children hostage—a very unusual *kind* of intruder, and one who seems impossible to defeat, but one who she must somehow attempt to out-think and out-maneuver to keep her family alive, as she struggles with a bizarre new kind of "Computer Virus." This one is exciting, surprising, and nail-bitingly tense, so don't miss it!

OTHER TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Laura J. Mixon, a frequent contributor to our sister magazine *Analog*, makes her *Asimov's* debut with a powerful and eloquent story about a team of technologists in a race with death who must push ahead with the terraforming of an icy world at any price—if they want to stay *alive*, that is—in "At Tide's Turning"; critically acclaimed British writer **Brian Stableford** returns with a sharp look at a "Rogue Terminator" (which probably *isn't* what you *think* it's going to be!); new writer **Elisabeth Malartre** takes us to a distant planet where Terran settlers face "A Windy Prospect" in their battle to survive; **Joseph Manzione**, making his own *Asimov's* debut, teaches us an unsettling lesson about where humans rank in the overall scheme of things, in "Cockroaches"; and popular writer **S.N. Dyer** returns with a clever new twist on the love-hate relationship between pet and owner, and a warning not to let *yours* near *your* keyboard, in a wry and funny look at "My Cat."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column continues its examination of the artistic "revolution" in science fiction that reshaped the genre in the sixties, with "The New Wave: Two"; and **Peter Heck** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, letters and other features. Look for our April issue on sale on your newsstand on February 27, 2001, or subscribe today (you can now subscribe electronically, online, at our new *Asimov's* Internet website, at *http://www.asimovs.com*), and be sure that you miss none of the great stuff we have coming up for you this year! Hey, and remember, a gift subscription to *Asimov's* makes a great Christmas gift, too!

COMING SOON

great new stories by **Eleanor Arnason**, **David Marusek**, **Robert Reed**, **Andy Duncan**, **Mike Resnick**, **Nancy Kress**, **Brian Stableford**, **Kage Baker**, and many others.

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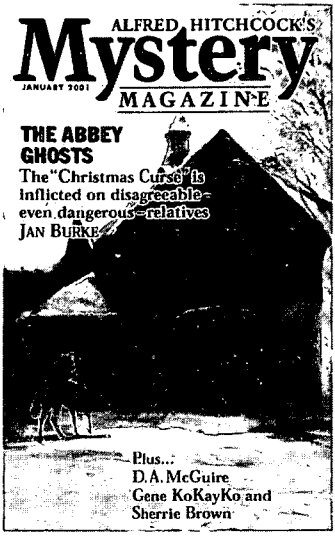

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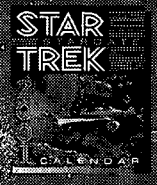

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